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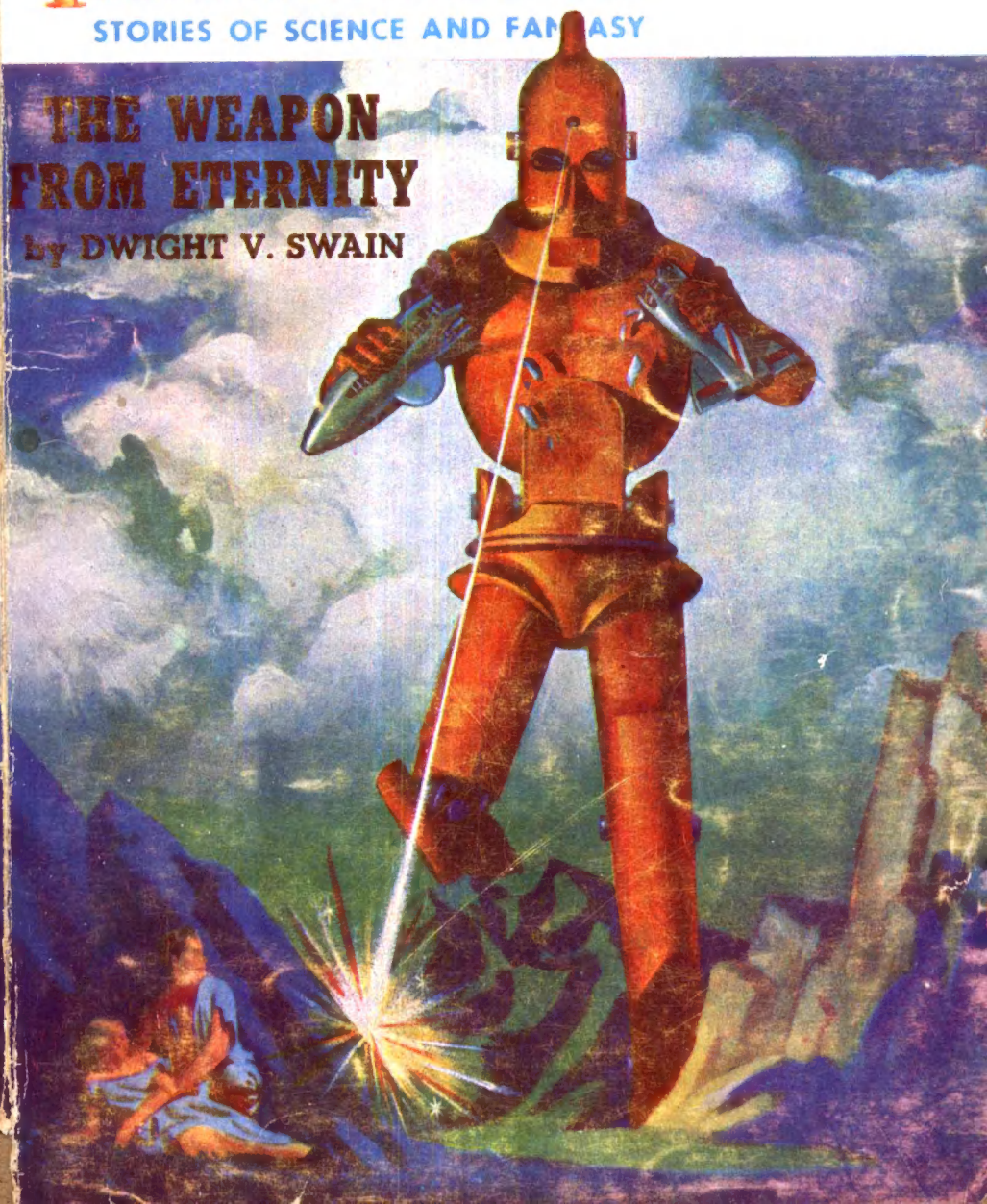
STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

SEPTEMBER 1952

35¢

THE WEAPON FROM ETERNITY

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN



Introducing the

AUTHOR



★
Harold W. McCauley

—THIS MONTH'S COVER ARTIST—



DOING this assignment for Madge has put me on rather unfamiliar ground. The fact is my fingers respond naturally enough when I'm working on a cover painting—but operating a typewriter puts me on the defensive. I'm used to expressing myself in colors, not words, so if this fails to make sense don't be surprised.

My art career began in 1913, July 11th—the day I was born. The place happened to be Chicago and I've never seen any reason to change it except for occasional travel periods which inevitably return me to the Windy City. I have a hunch it will always be that way because of the nice things Chicago brings to mind.

It was at the Art Institute in 1927

that J. Allen St. John, famed illustrator of the Edgar Rice Burroughs book jackets, introduced me to science fiction. I'll never forget that day for I went right out and bought a copy of the old *Amazing Stories*. I've been a science fiction fan ever since.

I didn't get around to illustrating for science fiction magazines until ten years later, and, coincidentally, *Amazing Stories* bought my first work. Since that time I've painted dozens of covers for various stf magazines and drawn several hundred interior story illustrations.

My most publicized work (from the standpoint of millions of people seeing it) has been unsigned posters for accounts including *Coca Cola*,

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MALCOLM SMITH, Art Editor

Front cover painting by Harold W. McCauley, illustrating a scene from, "The Weapon From Eternity." Interior illustrations by W. E. Terry.
Astronomical photograph, back cover, courtesy Yerkes Observatory

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The ditorial



WE'VE just walked out of a cyclone, so you'll pardon us if we take a few moments to catch our breath. At any rate that's how our recent trip to New York City seemed to us. We went there to spend a few days paying casual visits to friends and colleagues in the science fiction field. We enjoyed our visit but believe us it was anything but casual.

BIG Town is a sort of "out of this world" experience. Coming from a hamlet of some four million inhabitants (Greater Chicago—you lovely town!) we were—and probably always will be—impressed with the fact that half the population of the Earth is centered on Manhattan Island. You see people by the thousand and wherever you go, and they're all moving rapidly—we got the idea they are powered by built-in jets. That's the theme of New York: speed. The people—the taxis (some 28,000), even the sun seems in more of a hurry to get across the sky.

WE went to one afternoon cocktail party where a guest came rushing in out of breath, looked at his watch eagerly and announced to his host in a triumphant tone: "Missed the elevator coming into the building so I ran up the stairs. Saved at least two minutes—time for an extra martini!" Honestly, it happened.

COCKTAIL hour is a ritual in New York, even among the sci-

ence fiction people — and there are many of them working or living or both in Manhattan. Go to any bar in walking distance of a publishing office, literary agency or art studio and you'll find a few well known names in the field exchanging trade talk over 90 proof ice cubes and an hors d'oeuvre tray. For a couple of days you could have found us in any number of such establishments. We hasten to add we stuck strictly to milk (liberally spiked with Jamaica rum every time Bob Krepps—Geoff St. Reynard—was within spiking distance).

WE have a hunch that when man finally conquers space and regular interplanetary runs are the order of the day, they'll be taking off from LaGuardia on "cocktail runs" to Venus or Mars. You won't measure a space trip in miles or hours; simply, "See you on Mars after three old fashioned, Joe!"

BUT seriously (who's kidding?) we did have a nice time even if we did have to go on a high-charged vitamin diet when we got home. We saw many of our old friends (and yours) and some new ones too. Howard Browne, Lila Shaffer, and the rest of the gang at Ziff-Davis were as hale and hearty as ever—even more so as Howard beamed over his new brainchild, *Fantastic*, informing us it had clicked with the speed of a comet. Mr. Davis (our former boss and a nice guy) shared this enthusiasm, we heard, and planned to

switch AMAZING STORIES to digest format. This was especially good news to us since we had been suggesting digest format for a number of years to various vice presidents while we were a Z-D editor. So we welcome the old Aristocrat, AS, alongside IMAGINATION in the slick science fiction field.

ONE evening Frances (the charming marital side of our life), Howard Browne, and his sweet gal, Esther, and yours truly dropped in on Horace Gold at his apartment on our way to a dinner date with William P. McGivern. Horace and his lovely wife, Evelyn, received us graciously and we spent a couple of hours (we were late for dinner) over high-balls talking science fiction. Horace was bound we'd stay in town long enough for a Friday night poker game with some of the stf editors and writers at his place, but we couldn't make it. In a way it's probably better that we didn't. We're certain Horace would have felt downright glum over GALAXY suddenly becoming another Bill Hamling publication! . Hey, now, that's not such a bad idea at that. We'll keep it in mind for our next trip East. (Don't worry about us losing Madge that way; Ray Palmer, one of our favorite pigeons, always used to insist that when it comes to cards we suddenly reveal telepathic powers.)

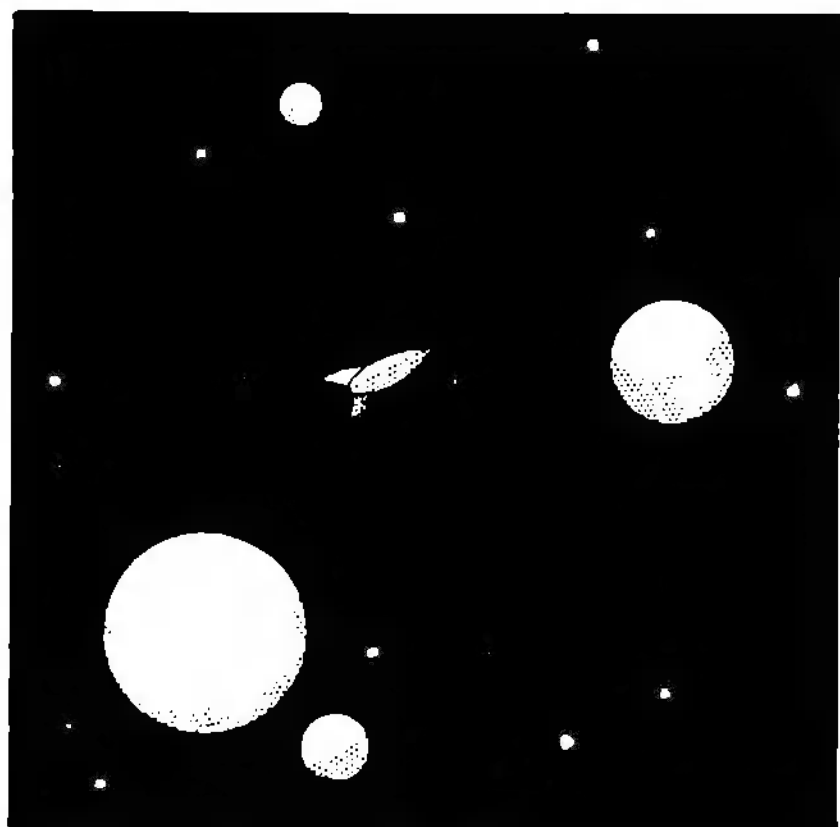
WE did meet Bill McGivern later that evening, and the next day (for cocktails, of course) and were pleased to learn that he had just sold a serial to the Post. Bill had that five-figure check glow, and all we've got to say is that no guy is more deserving of that kind of success. Bill has always been a top science fiction-fantasy writer and he

will be tops no matter what field he writes in. (His Post serial is a detective novel.)

WE managed to corral Geoff St. Reynard for a number of bull sessions. (Also to pick up the completed manuscript for next month's feature story on which Geoff had been making some revisions.) Geoff is busy these days turning out stories for Collier's and books for Rinehart (under his real name, Bob Krepps) but assures us Madge will always be on top of his writing schedule. (You hear that, son, that's an order!)

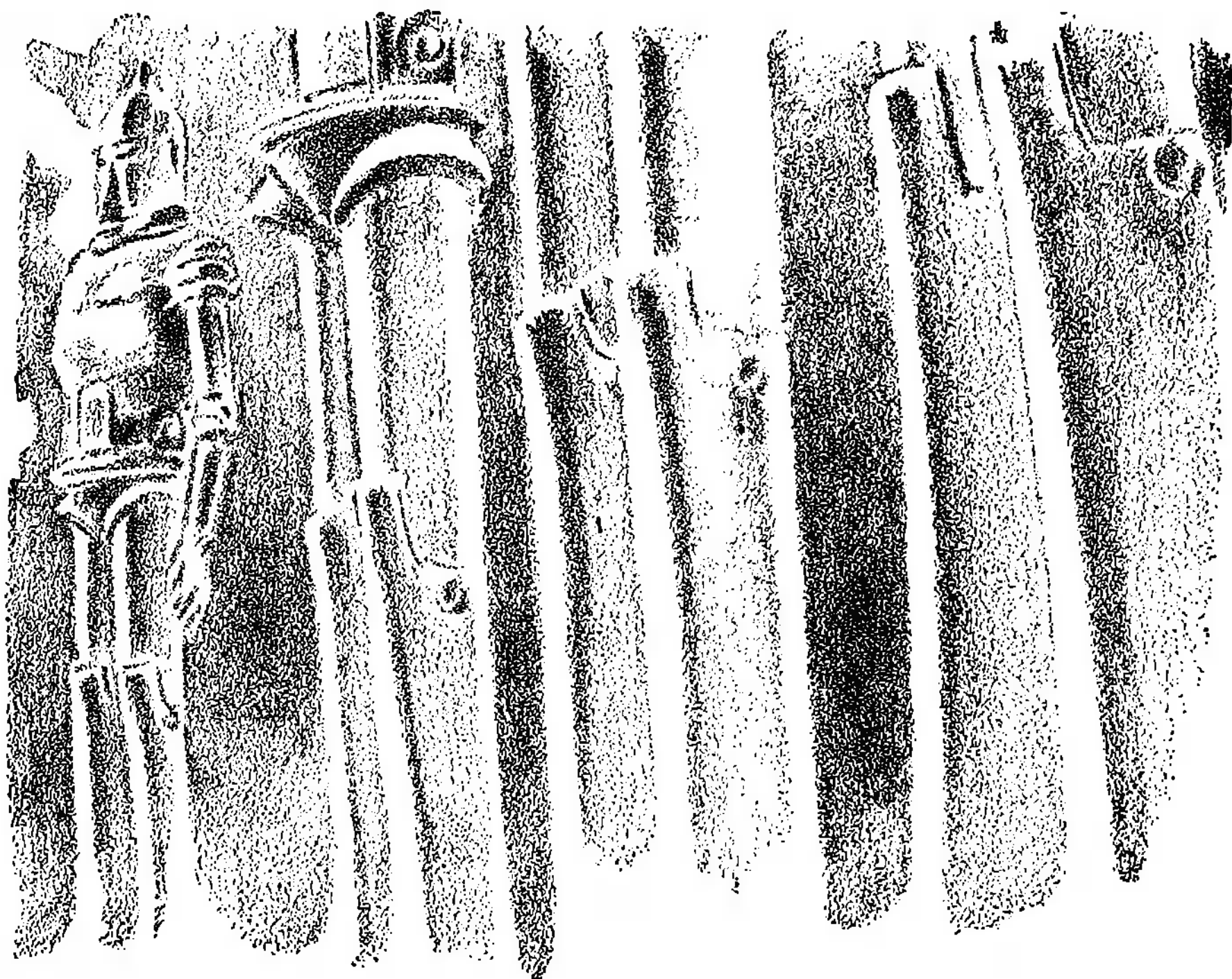
THEN there were visits with Agents and other writers too numerous to mention here, shopping tours, cocktail hours, a few Broadway shows, cocktails, a final salute to that Grand Lady with the torch in her hand, and a leisurely trip back home. There's no place like it--home. And you know something--the cocktails taste even better here!

See you next month. wlh



"But I thought YOU refueled it!"





THE WEAPON FROM ETERNITY

By

Dwight V. Swain

Legends spoke of a weapon too dreadful to use hidden somewhere among the stars—a weapon that was its own master — choosing its victims!

CHAPTER I

JARL Corvett selected the group—himself, Ungo, and five crewmen.

They left their great ship on the far side of Vesta; came down with the night in a fast raider carrier.

A hollow offered shelter. Like dust settling, they landed. Aban-

doning the craft, they pressed on towards their target. The hills fell behind. The final cordón was by-passed.

Then, at last, bleakly, they stared down at the sprawling building that had been Wassreck's workshop.

But lights beat on the white walls. Guards paced the parapets. The commissioner's own carrier thrust up in the courtyard.

Frowning, Jarl Corvett crouched deep in the shadows. Tension crawled his spine like a leather-footed *palau*. His own black thoughts pressed relentlessly in upon him: *Is this where it ends, warrior? Is this the place, here under the Federation's dazzling Forspark lights on a tiny astroidal speck that men call Vesta?*

Beside him, the darkness rustled. Scales brushed his arm. One-armed Jovian Ungo's hoarse whisper echoed over-loud in his ear: "Give it up, Jarl! Wassreck's gone, and they're ready. It's hopeless!"

"It was hopeless before," Jarl Corvett said tightly. "It was hopeless at Horla. But Wassreck came for me."

The Jovian's scaly hand gripped his shoulder in the darkness. "I know, Jarl. You're loyal. But this time—"

"Could you face Sais without trying? Could you tell her you'd left him?"

Ungo grunted, half-sullen. "Will it help if you're killed, too? Will it make her feel better?" He cursed in his own tongue. "Me, I still

like living. I'm not ready to die yet."

Jarl threw off the Jovian's arm. His words slashed, raw and savage, in spite of his efforts: "You can leave if you want to! I ask no man to risk his neck against his will!"

Dimly, against the sky, he could see Ungo's head sink down between the great, horny shoulders. "Don't gall me, you *chitza*! I go where you go! I always will!"

Jarl clenched his fists. He thought: *Yes, Ungo will always go where you go, Jarl Corvett. He proved that when he left one arm on Pluto for you. That's what's wrong with loyalty. It traps you, tears you two ways. Because whichever road you take, good men, good friends, must die.*

And Sais would be waiting

HE cursed aloud and crawled forward, away from big Ungo, digging in knees and elbows with savage force, taking out his fury on the rocky ground.

Ahead, just outside the blazing lake of light around the building, the air-vent loomed. Wriggling to it, he jerked out his knife and pried at the grilled lid's seal.

But then, once again, Ungo was beside him. "Here, let me at it, Jarl!" Heedless of danger, the Jovian surged to full height. His talon fingers splayed through the grill. The broad back, the mighty shoulders, strained and heaved.

There was a thin *spang*! of metal

parting. The lid tore free.

Jarl gripped his comrade's arm.
"Ungo "

"Forget it, Jarl. I understand.
Our job is down below."

A tightness came to Jarl Corvett's throat. Wordless, he swung his legs over the edge of the vent, lowered himself to full arm's length, and let go.

It was a six-foot drop into blackness so ebon that it made the outer night almost seem bright. Twisting, he crawled a few feet along the horizontal conduit that ran from shaft to building.

Ungo's gruntings drifted down as he wedged his great body through the hole. Then, with a thud, the Jovian, too, had landed. The other five followed, one by one.

"This way!" Jarl whispered. "The tube leads straight to the blower room."

Ghost-silent, they crept through the murk for what seemed miles. Fine dust rose about them in a choking haze, and there was an acrid stink of tanaline and *jeol*. Tiny *bulaks* chattered their fright, scampering from the raiders' path. The suction of the Banx unit at the tunnel's other end tugged at hair and tunics in a gusty, whistling gale.

Then, feeling ahead, Jarl touched a screen. He halted: half-turned. "We've made it. We're inside." Twisting, he ran his hand over the tube's side wall till he found the cleaning hatch. His searching fingers touched the bolt. He worked

it round.

The hatch swung open on creaking hinges. Knife in hand, Jarl slid out into the blower room, with its looming bulk of Banx unit transmuters and converters and compressors.

A dim rectangle on right marked the ramp to the floor above.

Cat-footed, flat to the wall, Jarl moved up the incline, the raiders at his heels.

A faint scuff of sound whispered in the stillness. Ahead, out a cross-corridor, a Martian *fala* in the blue tunic of a Federation guard moved into view.

Jarl froze, not daring to breathe. The guard crossed the ramp, not pausing, and went on down the corridor out of sight. The shuffle of his steps faded and died.

Jarl slid forward again till he reached the passage, then halted. Taut-nerved, he waited, listening.

Voices came dimly. Jarl lowered himself to the floor. Ever so cautiously, he peered around the corner.

FAR down the hall, the guard stood chatting with one of his fellows. A moment later, breaking off, he turned and started back towards the ramp again.

Jarl drew back. Rising, he wiped the sweat from the palm of his knife hand, then crouched waiting.

The sound of the *fala's* footsteps drifted to him, closer and closer.

Jarl sucked in air

The scuffling echoed through the silence. The guard stepped out on to the ramp.

Jarl leaped forward—catching the *fala's* chin from behind, jerking back the ugly head, slashing at the throat.

The guard's cry died in bubbling purple blood. He wrenched spasmodically, hands and feet threshing; then went limp.

Jarl dragged him backward—out of the corridor, down the ramp. Breathing hard, he lowered the sagging corpse to the floor.

Ungo touched his arm, gestured questioningly.

Jarl whispered: "The living quarters are upstairs. They'll have her there."

The Jovian nodded, not speaking.

Again Jarl dropped flat and wormed forward, searching the corridor.

No one was in sight.

Surging to his feet, he swung right down the hall to the next ramp, his crewmen behind him. Swift, silent, he raced to the second floor.

There were no guards here—only echoing stillness and blank, closed doors.

The first room was empty. In the second snored a sleeping *dau* captain from the Federation fleet.

Big Ungo whispered hoarsely, "This one's locked!"

It was the door at the end the door to the room that had once been Sais'.

Jarl pressed against it. Sheathing his knife, he brought out a light-gun

and pressing its muzzle against the lock, squeezed the trigger.

The silent beam blazed forth. The lock's bolt fused and fell away.

The raiders pushed into the room.

A girl lay in the bed, asleep. Quick, tight-lipped, Jarl crossed to her side.

She was a vision of slim blonde loveliness, this woman. A golden vision from a far-off world. As he looked at her, the thought flickered through Jarl Corvett's mind: *She's almost as beautiful as Sais.*

Dark Sais, *Ktar* Wassreck's daughter

Yet even while the girl slept, a deeper, darker mood seemed to shadow her loveliness, as if she held some brooding secret locked within her. Or perhaps it was only that a strain of clouded alien blood ran in her veins, from her mother—blood of Titan, or Io, or Venus.

"Is this her, Jarl?" big Ungo whispered. "Is she Ylana? Time's running short"

Jarl shook off his mood. "Yes. She's the one, the commissioner's daughter." He caught the girl's shoulder and jerked at it roughly, one hand to her mouth, in case she should scream.

SHE came awake with a start, grey eyes flaring wide in sudden panic. Her whole body convulsed as she saw the raiders.

Jarl threw himself on her, bearing her down. Fiercely, he whispered, "Quiet, if you wish to live!"

Her struggles ceased. Lips pale, breasts heaving, she lay stiff and unyielding.

He said: "Relax, woman! We're not going to hurt you."

Her lips moved on his palm. He raised his hand a fraction.

"Who are you?" Her voice shook. "What do you want here?"

"They call me Jarl Corvett."

The girl clutched her throat. "Jarl Corvett, the raider? The ally of Wassreck—?"

Jarl smiled at her thinly. "Ally, friend, comrade, brother. That's why I've come here. I needed a hostage."

"A hostage—?"

"For Wassreck. He's a prisoner. You'll buy his freedom."

The grey eyes distended. The girl breathed fast and shallow, ripe lips half-parted. "You madman—!" she whispered.

Jarl Corvett laughed harshly, and there was ice and fire in it. "Some say so. But Wassreck saved me at Horla. Tonight I've come here to pay back what I owe him."

"Jarl!" Ungo broke in, raw-voiced and urgent. "Quick! Hurry! They will find that dead guard any minute!"

"Yes." Jarl raised up. He spoke again to the girl—bleak, cold, rock-steady: "You're coming, Ylana. As to how—you do the choosing. But even if we have to tie you and gag you and carry you, you're coming!"

The girl's grey eyes probed his. Color came to her lips; they no

longer trembled. "You mean—you really believe you can storm in here and take me? That your handful of raiders can fight through the cordon—?"

"Freemen have done more."

"Freemen—?" Ylana's laugh was tight, bitter. "What do you and your outlaws know about freedom? To you, it means nothing but freedom to murder, to plunder!"

Her words stung like gas-hail slashing down upon Pluto. Jarl felt his breath quicken. "Who are you, to talk of the outlaw worlds and their plunder?" he lashed back at her fiercely. "What of your father's own fleet; your thrice-cursed Federation?"

The girl blazed. "The Federation brings order!"

"And what is your order but another name for plunder—the great planets' power to take what they choose from the lesser?" Jarl choked on his anger. "To you, I'm a pirate, because men like me sweep the void in our own raider ships to keep our people from starving. What else can we do, living on these barren rocks in the Belt, charred fragments of worlds that should never have been colonized? But your father—with no right on his side but the Federation fleet's might, he's named high commissioner—sent out to tear even our bleak asteroids from us by conquest—"

"Jarl—!" burst out Ungo.

"I'm coming!" Jarl towered over Ylana. "Get ready!"

THE girl sat up in her bed. Her fists gripped the covers. "I warn you, Jarl Corvett: You'll curse the day that you took me—"

"Because of your father?" Jarl laughed, short and curt. "I'll still chance it."

"No." The girl's grey eyes seethed, dark and dangerous. "Because of me, Ylana *rey* Gundre! Because I'll see you and your men die in torment, a thousand times worse than the flame-death at Horla—"

"I'll chance that, too." Jarl jerked back the covers.

Wordless, disdainful, the girl tossed her head. The golden hair rippled. Rising, she took a gown from a chair and pulled it about her slim, perfect figure.

"That's better." Jarl turned to Ungo. "We'll go down through the workshop. There's less chance there to trap us."

In hair-triggered silence, they moved back through the hallway, the girl boxed among them. A different ramp yawned. The door at its foot let them into the workshop, the place of the robots.

Wassreck's robots.

A name to conjure with, *Ktar* Wassreck. Master of robots, master of raiders. The brain of a genius in a pain-shriveled body. A mind that had fathomed the key to the star-stones: courage to strike even through Oyo's flame-death, staking his soul for Jarl Corvett at Horla.

And here were his robots—towering metal monsters, set shoulder to

shoulder. He dreamed of them, lived for them. More even than dark Sais, they were his children.

Children of a nightmare, Jarl thought as he led the way past them. Bleakly, he wondered why Wassreck had made them — what dark, twisted drive had spurred their creation.

They came to a door. Jarl faced his raiders. "The hallway's outside. The third ramp to the left leads down to the blowers."

He turned to the girl, the commissioner's slim daughter. "Stay with me, Ylana. And forget about running or screaming."

She moved closer, not speaking. The grey eyes were unfathomable.

He stepped into the passage, the girl close behind him. The crewmen followed.

Then, as they came abreast the second ramp, he heard voices—a harsh, angry crackle that rose louder each second.

Jarl stopped in his tracks and spun round to the crewmen. "Quick! up the ramp—!"

Gripping Ylana's wrist, he half-dragged her with him.

Barely in time, they crowded into the entry. Down the hall, by the blowers, someone cursed loudly. More footsteps pounded. Metal banged metal.

Big Ungo burst out. "It's that guard, Jarl. They've found him—!" He clutched at his blaster—head down, geared for battle.

Now new steps hurried towards

them, from the way they had come.

Jarl whipped out his light-gun. "We're not done! The commissioner's carrier is out in the courtyard. We'll blast our way to it!"

"Which way—?"

"Back up this ramp! We'll drop from a window!"

THEY sped up the incline to the second level, then down the corridor. But before they could reach a room that opened on the inner court, tumult broke out on this upper floor also. Guards shouted. There was a beat of feet; the clamor of men rushing towards them.

Jarl leaped for a doorway. "In here—on the double!"

His men crowded past him. Shoving Ylana before him, Jarl followed. Inside, he half-closed the door.

Like statues, they waited. The hurrying guard squad came closer.

Jarl gripped Ylana tight, her slim body hard against him. He cupped his hand over her mouth. The golden hair brushed his cheek. He could feel her heart pounding.

The first of the blue-uniformed Federation fighters ran past the half-open door.

Jarl poised his light-gun.

In the same instant, lance-sharp pain stabbed through the hand he held over Ylana's mouth.

He jerked back by instinct—and knew of a sudden even as he did it that the girl had bitten him.

But his flinching left Ylana's mouth clear for an instant. She

screamed, shrill and piercing.

Jarl cursed. He tried to throw her aside.

But she clutched his belt, clinging. Snatching his razor-edged knife from its sheath, she slashed at him.

He rocked backward, off balance.

The girl twisted. He glimpsed her face—teeth bared, features strain-strait. Back-handed, she lashed at his temple with the knife-haft, her full strength behind it.

It struck home as the first guards burst through the doorway

CHAPTER II

TWIN blue-and-silver Federation banners marked the place of the high commissioner of all the asteroid.

His table stood at the far end of the vast room that had been *Kiar* Wassreck's workshop. Other tables radiated out in a great arc from it—tables crowded with officers of the Federation fleet. Heavy-thewed Uranian *daus* sat side by side with slim reptilian *Pervods*. Transmi of Venus, all ear-stalks and sucking tubes, faced rubbery, flat-featured Europeans. Creatures of half a hundred divergent races, hybrids and mutants, they gathered here from all the far-flung planets of the Federation. Their rising voices clashed in strange cacophony through the tinkle of cutlery and crystal, thrown back in a din of ringing echoes from the giant metal robots that still lined the walls.

Straightening in spite of the

weight of his shackles, shrugging off the hands of the guards who flanked him, Jarl Corvett met the seething hostility of their glances with stiff-necked defiance. But underneath, questions nagged him: *Why am I here? Who ordered me brought to this banquet?*

But here he stood. That was what counted. Boldly, he surveyed the room. stared unflinching across at the commissioner.

A handsome man, Commissioner *rey* Gundre. Heavy-bodied and aging, in these later days. But still personable, still a figure to catch the eye, even slack-faced and slouched in his seat as now.

He was a man of Earth, plainly, with all the strengths and weaknesses and surging conflicts that went with that heritage. The sunburst insignia of his rank stood out against the deep blue of his impeccably tailored uniform. The white blaze that accented the darkness of his hair only made him the more striking.

His aide sat at his left hand, Ylana at his right.

Ylana the golden, daughter of the high commissioner himself.

And Jarl Corvett's nemesis.

Even looking at her here, Jarl could feel the muscles at the hinges of his jaws draw tight.

Tonight she sat slim and graceful at the banquet table in a scarlet stylon gown. Her blonde hair swept up in a soft golden nimbus like that of Tal Neeni, sea goddess

of Callisto. The red lips were smiling, the grey eyes asparkle.

Yet even when she laughed, some dark inner mood seemed to shadow her beauty, even as it had last night while she lay asleep.

That shadow Was it alien blood, or a secret? Again Jarl caught himself wondering. He thought: *I should hate her!* And in the same moment: *Even Sais is no lovelier*

Cursing himself for a fool and a weakling, he tore his eyes from her and studied the aide.

He was *Malya*, this officer; *Malya* and warrior. His dark rough-hewn face stayed emotionless, immobile. But the black *Malya* eyes ranged ceaselessly—bleak and watchful, never still. Ruthlessness was in them, and recklessness. a spirit that seemed to mock Jarl Corvett and deny the blue Federation tunic that the dark aide wore.

BITTERLY, Jarl looked down at his shackles. He thought of the *Malyas* among his own crewmen; the wild, free-born raiders.

How long would it be before they, too, wore the blue of the Federation?

Or, before they died

Now the commissioner stirred. Chin sunk on chest, he mumbled something to his rock-faced lieutenant.

The lean aide nodded briefly. Twisting in his seat, he pounded on the banquet table—first with his fist; then the butt of his heavy Tal-

istan ray-gun.

The sound rose even above the tumult and raucous voices, echoing and re-echoing through the great room that till short days before had been Wassreck's clandestine robotics laboratory.

Slowly, the noise and voices died away. Chairs scraped. Heads turned. Eyes of *Fantay* and of *Jala*, Mercurian and Martian, *Chonya*, Thorian, *Pervod*, searched out the table where the aide and the high commissioner sat.

Not quite steadily, then, the commissioner rose, a brimming *kabat* goblet in his hand. His eyes had the glassy shine of bright new mirrors, and his tunic was rumped, twisted awry.

Swaying a little, the commissioner slapped loose-fingered at the blouse, as if to brush away the wrinkles. *Kabat* slopped from the goblet and spilled over his hand. Blinking, he looked down at the spreading green stain. A foolish grin flickered fleetingly on his face.

Ylana leaned towards him; spoke sharply.

The commissioner's head twitched. He straightened, and his shoulders snapped back to a too-stiff 'attention' Jerkily, he raised his glass.

"A toast to our host, officers!" he cried in a drink-thickened voice. "A toast to *Ktar* Wassreck—may he rot in hell!"

Leaden silence came down on the room like a curtain. Furtive glances flicked out to the towering robots,

shoulder to shoulder, that lined the walls.

It made Jarl Corvett smile a little, the way the officers hung back. Did some recall H'sana? Were others on Pallas? Free or captive, *Ktar* Wassreck still put cold fear in them!

Ktar Wassreck: Outlaw, scientist, scholar. Wassreck at Horla—gnome head tilted, eyes burning, laughing in the face of death. Wassreck and Sais

Spasmodically, Jarl's fists clenched. His bruised head throbbed dully.

"To our host!" the commissioner cried again, lurching forward. "To Wassreck—"

The spell broke. The officers surged to their feet. Their shouts rang through the clamor: "To Wassreck—"

"—May he rot in hell!"

They drank it down.

Fury swirled up in Jarl Corvett, hot and all consuming.

Swaying, face flushed, the commissioner clutched a decanter. He spilled more *kabat* into his goblet. "Now—one for Corvett! A toast to Jarl Corvett—"

HE broke off as Ylana tugged at his tunic. Lines of angry tension slashed the smooth loveliness of her face. Her lips moved, wrapping round curt syllables.

Her father laughed drunkenly. He turned towards the doorway where guards and raider stood, and

his hand swept up in a clumsy broadside gesture. "Drag him out!" he shouted. "Flush the *chitza* out of his hole!"

The two Mercurians who flanked Jarl closed in. One clutched his arm.

Jarl's fury seethed higher. In spite of his shackles, he jerked free of the Mercurian's taloned hand. He felt cold arrogance ring in his voice: "No one drags Jarl Corvett! I'll walk alone!"

For the fraction of a second the guards stood hesitant, lobed eyes clouded beneath their nictitating lids.

Jarl swung his arms back sharply. The chains of his shackles whispered, link on link, like a flexing metal knout.

The Mercurians' eyes fell. Contemptuous, ignoring them, Jarl turned away. Head high, back unbending, he strode towards the table of the high commissioner.

The Earthman smirked at him, still swaying.

Recklessness sang a death-song in Jarl Corvett's veins.

"Hail, coward!" he cried fiercely, and swept the crowd with a scathing glance. "Is this the best your Federation fleet can offer — scum so low that they draw their sport from taunting prisoners? *Huroks* so green with fear that you must bring me here in bonds?"

An angry babble rose from the tables, and the commissioner's *kabat*-heavy lids drooped lower. But his lips twisted in the mirthless sem-

blance of a smile.

"Do you rate yourself so high that you think I'd waste time on you, *starbo*?" He laughed, deep in his throat. "No, brigand! You're here against my will!"

"Against your will—?"

"Yes. You're here to face another — one whom even I cannot deny, after what you've done."

Wordless, narrow-eyed, Jarl studied him for a moment. "Then who—?"

"Who would it be?" This time the commissioner's laugh was sour and savage. "Can you not guess, *yanat*?" And then: "My daughter, Ylana."

"Your daughter—!" Jarl pivoted to Ylana.

"Yes!" The girl came to her feet as he turned, grey eyes blazing. Her words burst forth in a scalding flood. "Did you think I spoke empty words when I swore last night that you'd live to curse the day you tried to seize me? Did you take my promise for a hollow threat—?"

She broke off; swept round the table, a furious vision in gold and scarlet. Her hand flicked up in a tight, peremptory gesture. "Atak! Seize him—!"

The commissioner's rock-faced *Malya* aide closed in on Jarl, moving round behind him.

Ylana raised a shaking fist. "On your knees, *stabat*!"

A numb incredulousness crept through Jarl Corvett. But he

stood the straighter. "I kneel for no man — nor for woman!"

A savage kick in the back of the knees caught him from behind in the same instant. His legs buckled. He spilled forward, asprawl on the floor.

"A whip—!" cried Ylana, face white with passion. "A whip for this raider dog they call Jarl Corvett!"

One of the Mercurian guards sprang forward, jerking off his heavy, *stanal*-buckled belt. "Here, *Shi* Ylana! The plate will cut deep!"

The girl snatched it from him. Her face contorted.

"No, Ylana—!" It was her father, the *kabat*-haze fading from his eyes. "Would you drag yourself down to the level of this *chitza*, here before officers of the fleet—?"

The girl turned on him as a *quirst* turns on its pursuers. "Who talks of dragging down, and of the fleet?" she lashed fiercely. "Do you dare to speak—you, with your plots and schemes, your secret meetings—?"

The high commissioner flushed to the hair. "Ylana! Silence!"

"Was it you this *starbo* and his scum dragged out of bed last night? Was it you who screamed and called the guard when they sought to flee in your own carrier?"

Her father's jaws went stiff and set. His clenched fists bore down upon the table. But he broke before Ylana's eyes; said nothing more.

The girl turned her back on him.

Furiously, she challenged Jarl: "You were brave enough last night, when you dealt only with a helpless woman! But how is your courage now, bold raider? How does force taste, when another hand holds the lash?"

Her shoulders twisted. Gripping the Mercurian's belt by the tongue, she slashed out with the heavy *stanal* clasp.

Jarl rocked back. The buckle sang past his face, so close he could feel its breath.

But now, again, the *Malya's* foot caught him from behind. It knocked him forward on his shackled hands, off balance.

Before he could recover, the belt whipped down again. The buckle tore at his cheek. He rocked with pain.

"Is it different, this time, raider?" Ylana shrieked. "Are you ready to sing another song?"

Tight-jawed, stiff-backed, Jarl met her gaze. He did not speak.

The girl's red lips peeled back. "I asked you a question, dog!" she cried. "I want an answer!"

She slashed out with the belt again. The buckle seared his jaw and neck.

"Answer me!"

Wordless, Jarl swayed.

The buckle ripped at his forehead. Blood gushed down into his eyes.

"Answer me—!"

Jarl lurched forward, clutching for her. But she darted back, out of his reach. The stylon gown rustled. The buckle tore a path

along his scalp. The room blurred and swam before his eyes. Desperately, he tried to cover his face with his shackled hands. But the tangled chains were too short. He could only double forward, face to the floor.

THE buckle struck behind his right ear with stunning force, a fiery knife stabbing through a red haze of pain.

"Wait, Ylana—!" It was Atak the *Malya's* voice, drifting dimly to Jarl as from afar. "Those blows to the head—he cannot last—"

"Then drag him up! Tear off his tunic! Bear his back, so that I can see the red blood run!"

Hands clawed at Jarl's clothes. He felt his tunic rip away. The aide dragged him up; twisted him about.

"Hold him there, Atak! Hold him tight!" came Ylana's cry.

The buckle seared Jarl's back—once, twice, a dozen times.

"Speak, *starbo*! Beg for mercy as you made me beg—!"

Jarl cursed her with a raw, pain-surgings hate; cursed her with all the black epithets of a raider and the warrior worlds.

"Still stubborn, *chitza*—?" Wild hysteria was in Ylana's voice. The buckle bit in again.

Atak's hoarse whisper rasped in his ear: "You fool, give up! The woman's mad! Even a raider should know that there's a time to crawl!"

Jarl clenched his teeth.

The girl cried, "You see, Atak? He loves the lash—!"

She struck again.

The commissioner's voice slashed harshly, the fog of drink long gone: "Ylana! You'll kill him—!"

"You—!" The girl's contempt was a writhing, burning thing. "Where were you last night, you *kabat*-soaked sot? You, with your talk of duty, your fat-puffed pomp—"

Her father's voice went clipped and tight. "Enough, woman! Raider or not, this man's my prisoner. Tomorrow I'll ship him on to the Venus headquarters. He'll die in the *slan*-chambers there; not by your hand." The room echoed with the flat slap of his palm cracking down on the banquet table. "Atak! Get his tunic! Send him to his cell."

"Yes, Excellency . . ." The *Malya* let go Jarl Corvett's arms.

Blinking the blood from his eyes, the raider stood swaying. Still numb, still not quite believing, he stared at golden Ylana, in her scarlet *stylon* gown.

Now, her hair hung down, no longer nimbus. Her lips were pale, and her breasts rose and fell too fast. Madness gleamed in her dark-circled eyes.

She snatched the tunic from Atak. "Here! Let me . . ." Whirling, she ran to Jarl and thrust the wadded garment into his shackled hands. "Brave raider—!"

She spat full in his face.



Jarl fought against showing pain as the girl brought the belt down on his back.

The *Malya* aide caught her arm and jerked her back. "If you were not *rey* Gundre's daughter—" He cursed under his breath. "Get out! You disgrace us!"

Gripping Jarl's arm, he led him

from the hall. "I cannot expect your pardon, Jarl Corvett. It would be too much to ask from any raider, any man. But in their day, my ancestors roved the void . . ."

His voice trailed off. Turning to

the guards, he said, "Take him to his cell. I'll see that one of the fleet *ktars* comes on down."

WEAK, tottering, Jarl let them lead him back to the old, thick-walled wing they had given over to the prisoners. He had not even the strength to curse when the guard, a Martian *jala* with all his race's fiendish love of cruelty, tripped him skillfully, so that he sprawled on his face as he crossed the threshold to the room that was his cell.

The door clanged shut on the Martian's ghoulish laugh. Sick with pain, Jarl dragged himself up and crawled to the bunk. Belly-down, he sagged onto the springless frame.

How long he lay there he never knew. It was all he could do to breathe, to be. The room about him was a reeling, distorted world of mists and feverish dreams.

Then, at last, that, too, passed. Wearily, he pulled himself upright and shook out his wadded tunic.

Metal clanged on the floor.

Jarl stiffened in spite of his wounds. Swiftly, he bent and felt beneath the bunk.

His hand touched metal. It was a knife—a keen, long-bladed telonium fighting *skrii*.

For a long, long moment he sat in silence, gripping its heavy haft. Then, in the darkness, he slowly smiled.

A *Malya* was still a *Malya*, whether he wore the Federation's uniform

or not.

Tomorrow they'd ship him to the Venus headquarters, the *slan*-chambers, death.

But this was tonight, the darkest hour, and he had a knife, and the high commissoner's carrier still stood in the court outside.

CHAPTER III

THE fleet-bell was tolling the nineteenth hour before the *ktar* came down.

Lying in the darkness, waiting for him, Jarl battled in stubborn silence against the pain. He found himself giving heed to a thousand little things—the roughness of the pollard-weave against his lacerated cheek—a prowling *peffok's* distant cry. Faint, pervasive scents of doloid dust, of must and *jeol*, pressed in upon him. He savored the raw taste of blood in his mouth the saltiness of sweat when he ran his tongue along his lips. Once, dimly, he caught the harsh rasp of Ungo's voice, drifting to him from some other room.

Ungo of Jupiter, Big Ungo the loyal. He'd come here, protesting, on a fool's mad mission. And now

A flood of black doubt welled up in Jarl Corvett—doubt of himself, his world, his cause. Would his dreams end here, in this dreary cell? Would morning find him lancing out through space on his way to Venus and the *slan*-chambers?

And would Wassreck die?

Writhing, fists clenched, he tried to drive the vision of the burning eyes, the pain-racked body, from his brain.

But the image, the dark thoughts, would not go away.

Because Wassreck was on Venus already. Wassreck had no hope, save in him, Jarl Corvett

An incoherent, protestful sound rose in his throat. Spasmodically, he gripped the bunk's chill metal frame; twisted as if to rend it, tear it apart.

The effort made his tortured muscles shriek with pain. His ears rang. The room rocked wildly. He gasped and sagged forward, plunging down through green-and-purple depths of icy fire into a bottomless, slowly-eddying pool.

Then the pool resolved. Of a sudden he was looking into Sais' dark eyes. She was smiling at him, a tender smile, and her fingers were cool against his cheek, her soft lips welcoming his.

But a misty barrier rose between them—a barrier of heart and mind that seared like a white-hot iron: *How can I face her? What can I say, if her father dies?*

He cried aloud, a hoarse, choked cry, and Sais' face vanished. Once more, the room closed in upon him. Again he lay straining on the bunk—tasting the blood, drinking in the stink of doloid dust and *jeol*.

Sais, and Wassreck. Wassreck, and Sais.

He wondered if he'd ever see

either of them again.

Somewhere outside, a vague new stir of movement broke the stillness.

Jarl stiffened. For a moment he grasped the knife. Then, relaxing, after a moment's hesitation, he slid the sleek blade out of sight beneath his leg.

The sounds drew nearer; finally paused outside his cell. A blur of muffled, grumbling words seeped through the door. The bolt clicked back.

It was the *ktar*, a dead-white, four-armed *kroy* of Ganymede. Flicking on the light, adjusting the vocodor translator, the creature brushed smoothly into the room. Behind him, the *fala* guard lounged idly back against the jamb, thumbs hooked in belt.

JARL shifted, then lay still again, not speaking. He was thankful to Atak—thankful the *Malya* had sent a Ganymedan *ktar*. Few were more talented or highly skilled or kind.

The *ktar* crossed to him and set down the globe that held the impedimenta of the healing craft. "How is it, raider?"

Jarl grunted and lifted his shoulders a fraction in a shrug.

The *ktar* probed the cuts that gashed Jarl's back with deft, sure, pseudopodal fingers. "Nasty. That thrice-cursed *stanal* buckle bit deep," Swiftly, he cleaned the wounds and applied the healing gel.

Jarl winced and clenched his

teeth.

"Up, now," the *ktar* commanded. "Let me at your face."

Stiffly, Jarl twisted. Keeping the precious knife covered with his buttocks, he swung his legs to the floor and sat up.

The *ktar* worked on in silence for a time. Then, at last, he straightened. "That does it." He laughed—wry, almost bitter. "By the time you get to Venus, you'll be in the best shape to die."

Picking up the globe, he pivoted and, with the peculiar floating motion of his kind, moved towards the door.

Jarl gripped the haft of the telonium *skrii*. Tension came alive in him, hot and quivering. Rising from the bunk, he followed the *kroy*, holding the knife out of sight behind him. "I thank you, *ktar* . . ." He dared say no more for fear his voice might betray him.

The Ganymedan muttered something incoherent and passed out into the hall. The *fala* guard, in turn, planted a many-jointed arm appendage hard against Jarl's chest and roughly shoved him back. His mottled throat-sac quivered. "No farther, *chitza!*"

Wordless, Jarl swayed. He made a show of cringing.

The *fala* laughed harshly. His bulging eyes flicked to the hall outside. Turning, he gripped the door-handle and started to pull the portal shut.

Jarl leaped at him like a pouncing

zanth, stabbing for the throat-sac with the keen-edged *skrii* blade.

The point bit in, even as the Martian tried to throw up a warding arm. What might have been a shout came out as a rush of blood and bubbling air.

The *fala* tottered, coughing out his life. Down the corridor, the Ganymedan whirled.

Jarl snatched the ray-gun from the toppling guard's holster. His voice rasped, low-keyed and tense: "Don't make me kill you, *ktar!* I want only freedom, not your life!"

The *kroy*'s eyes flicked down to the leveled gun. He stopped short—stiff, silent.

"Back here!" Jarl clipped. "Back in my cell . . ."

Wordless, dead-white face a chalky mask, the *kroy* slithered past him.

"Take him with you!" Jarl gestured to the fallen *fala* guard.

The *ktar* bent. His pseudopods locked onto the dead Martian's shoulders. He dragged the corpse out of the corridor, into the cell.

Jarl swept up the wave-pencil key from where it had fallen as the *fala* died. Tight-drawn as a Uranian *tal*-string, gun still lined on the Ganymedan's neuro-plexus, he jerked the cell door shut and slid the wave-pencil into its slot beside the lock.

THE bolt clicked home. A fierce excitement flared within Jarl. Heart pounding, heedless of the fatigue and pain that racked him, he

spun about and ran, half-reeling, down the hall.

He wondered how much time he had.

Or if he had any.

Wassreck and Sais He gripped the ray-gun tighter.

The first three doors he passed stood open.

The fourth was closed and locked.

Jarl slid the wave-pencil into the slot.

The bolt snapped back. Shoving open the door, he strained his eyes, searching the darkness of the room.

A thick, familiar voice snarled sleepily from a bunk.

"Ungo—!"

The great, horny shoulders heaved up. The misshapen head lurched into view. "Jarl—!" It was a half gasp, half sob. "Jarl, I thought they'd done for you—that you'd gone under—!"

Jarl reeled against the Jovian, clutching the mighty arm. "Quiet! They'll be after us any second!"

He could feel Ungo's muscles swell. "Let them—!"

Jarl laughed in spite of his tension, his pain. "Not yet, Ungo. Not till the job is done!" He pivoted. "Come on!"

The Jovian's head sank down between the bulging shoulders. His eyes gleamed. "The tube again—the way we came—?"

Jarl paused at the door. "No." He peered up and down the corridor.

"Then what—?"

"The commissioner's carrier. It's still in the court outside. We'll grab it as soon as I get back." Jarl started forward.

Ungo caught his wrist. "Jarl . .

"What—?"

"There may be something you don't know "

Jarl came around sharply. "Speak up! Time's short!" Once more, the tension was climbing in him.

Ungo fumbled: "The guards—they talked a little. They say the reason *rey* Gundre went all-out on this raid was for a weapon, more than Wassreck."

Jarl felt the cords along his neck draw tighter. "A weapon—?"

"Some new thing Wassreck worked out. A beam that focuses energy drawn from cosmic dust." The Jovian's voice sank lower. His head thrust forward. "Jarl, they claim it'll blast a ship right out of space, at almost any range. They've got it geared and mounted now."

Jarl braced himself against the door. It dawned on him that his palm was slick with sweat against the ray-gun's butt. The little things came back to him—the tastes, the smells, the sounds. Again he peered up and down the empty hall.

A weapon that focused the power that lay in cosmic dust—? Even to talk of it was sheer madness!

Yet Wassreck had made madness come to life so many times

Involuntarily, Jarl Corvett shivered.

"If it's true, they'll blast us down

before we even get the carrier to our ship," said Ungo. He scrubbed his scaly hand along his hip. "We wouldn't have a chance "

JARL bit down hard. With savage effort, he forced himself to think; to shake off the bleak despair that kept rising in him, ever higher. "What chance could we have if we went back through the tube, the air-vent?"

"We could maybe hide

"On Vesta—?" Jarl laughed aloud. "They'd find us as easily as in our cells!" He broke off. The laughter went out of him, replaced by an urgency even more feverish than that which had gone before. "No, Ungo! It means we've got to run! We'd have to even if we could find a place to hide!"

"But why, Jarl—?" The big Jovian scowled and fumbled.

"A weapon like that, and you ask why?" Jarl cursed in harsh, bitter syllables. "What about the others—the outlaw worlds? What will it mean when the Federation fleet sweeps down on H'sana?—on Ceresta?"

It was Ungo's turn to curse. Jarl shoved the wave-pencil into his hand. "Here! Break out the men! And hurry!"

"But you—"

Jarl laughed. Of a sudden, once again, recklessness was boiling in him. "We came here on a mission!"

"Not the woman—!"

"She'll still make *rey* Gundre hold his fire! She'll still buy Wassreck free!"

Ungo twisted. His bulk loomed rock-rigid, bigger than ever. "You can't, Jarl! I won't let you! You are sick—crazy—"

The fire of recklessness in Jarl glowed brighter. "Tell me that tomorrow, Ungo!" he clipped through clenched teeth. "You may convince me—after the commissioner's ordered his men to shoot us down with that hell-cat aboard!"

Ungo's breath came faster. "Then let me go, Jarl! Let me get her—!"

Jarl brought the ray-gun up, stone-steady. "We may both die on Vesta, Ungo. That's enough for me to have resting on my conscience."

"But Jarl—"

"I'll shoot if I have to, Ungo."

Their eyes locked, and for a long moment they stood statue-like, unmoving. Then, half-sullenly, the Jovian stepped aside. "I'll be waiting, Jarl. Whatever happens, I'll be waiting."

Jarl did not answer. Of ■ sudden there were no words for him to say to Ungo. Ray-gun in hand, he ran down the hall, picking his way through the maze of ramps and corridors.

He thought: *It would have been better if Wassreck had let me die on Horla.*

Then, at last, he reached Ylana's room. It came to him as a shock when there was no guard.

Silently, he opened the door; stepped swiftly in, gun up and ready.

The bed, the room, were empty.

IN a sort of frenzy, he ran through the rest of the suite; jerked open the neutron-bath and closets.

But the girl was gone.

He spun about, for a wild moment ready to race on through the rambling building, searching further.

But that was madness, and in his heart he knew it. Not even a clue as to Ylana's whereabouts had been left behind. He might hunt for hours to no avail.

And time was running short the seconds ticking by.

Jarl sagged back numbly. The fire went out of him. A dinning echo drummed within his brain. *I've failed I've failed I've failed*

Wassreck had gone through Horla's holocaust for nothing. Sais would weep and turn away.

As for Ceresta

But there was still Ungo to think of Ungo, and the five dauntless, swaggering raider crewmen who'd come here with him. He owed it to them at least to try to get away.

Leaden-footed, he stumbled back through the maze of halls and ramps again.

Then he was back in the corridor of the cells. Ungo lumbered up beside him, eyes alight with a lust for battle. "Jarl! We knocked us off a guard station—!"

The five crewmen crowded around

—grinning wolfishly, displaying weapons.

Jarl said dully, "Ungo, she was gone."

The Jovian shrugged his massive shoulders. "It goes that way sometimes." And then: "We can't wait, Jarl. The far sky's getting grey already."

"All right."

"We've found a gate to the court
"

"Let's go, then." Woodenly, Jarl walked with them to the heavy door and peered through a crevice into the courtyard.

The personal carrier of *rey* Gundre, high commissioner of all the asteroids, rose stark and sleek, a shining silver lance against the darkness of the sky. Blue-uniformed Federation guards patrolled in pairs or stood their posts around it, weapons dully gleaming.

The sight of the ship, the fighters, somehow lifted Jarl. Of a sudden he knew that now, of all times, he needed a foe that he could see and strike.

He clipped curt orders: "We'll come out fast and trust to shock to get us through. The first man aboard grabs the controls. The last racks shut the hatch. Blast as soon as the bell rings!"

The raiders drew close, weapons ready. Jarl cut through the bolt on the door.

"Now?" whispered Ungo.

"Now!"

UNGO'S bulk struck the gate with a splintering crash. The raiders charged for the ship like ravening *zanth*s that race to reach their prey.

Knife ready, ray-gun ablaze, Jarl Corvett leaped forward in his crewmen's van.

Guards spun about. Desperately, the nearest tried to form to meet the rush.

Jarl drove the knife deep into a *Pervod's* breast; blasted a *dau* back with his ray-gun's full charge. The fierce joy of conflict leaped in him. As from afar, he heard the shouts of his men as they lunged into the fray.

The guards' ranks wavered.

But now those from beyond the carrier were rushing to their aid. Steel clashed on steel. A great bulbous-bodied Thorian hurtled down on Jarl. Its tentacles wrapped round him, crushing him.

Savagely, he slashed at the leathery body; blasted with the ray-gun, straight into the repulsive face.

The Thorian's tentacles fell away. Jarl glimpsed Big Ungo, smashed down a *dau* with a blow of his one mighty arm. There was a smell of blood and burnt flesh; wild screams of rage and fear and anguish.

"To the ship—!" Jarl shouted. He hacked his way up the blood-slippery ramp; clutched Ungo's belt and half-dragged the Jovian aboard.

The last of the raiders scrambled in behind them. The hatch clanged shut. The ready bell leaped to

jangling life.

There was a sudden roar of auxiliary gravicomps. The gyro-indicators jiggled and swayed in their mountings. Men lurched awkwardly, caught momentarily off balance in the crushing force of too-fast acceleration.

Then stability returned. The carrier speared upward, out from Vesta, into the spark-spangled, glittering murk of the boundless astroidal night.

Jarl turned, seeking out the crewmen, and a sudden sickness gripped him. There were only three now; three and Big Ungo.

But the dead were dead, and they had gone as raiders go. Bleakly, he made his way to the viziscreen and turned it on. Spinning the dials, he drew a cross on the specific black emptiness where his ship had been scheduled to pick them up. His fingers shook a little, and his earlier, darker mood came back to nag him. *We're overdue, a day behind already. What if they've given us up and gone? What if a fleet patrol has flushed them out?*

Grimly, he calculated the carrier's chances of making Ceres on her own such slim, slim chances

Only then, as he manipulated the dials, a great, shark-like bulk loomed on the viziscreen. At his elbow, Ungo thrust out a quivering talon and cried, "It's her, Jarl! The *Ghost!* She's still waiting!"

Stiff-fingered, Jarl adjusted the focus. The familiar outlines of the

raider ship sharpened. Silent, space-drive off, she drifted shadow-like through the asteroids like some strange, cylindrical metal world.

JARL let out his breath, all at once acutely conscious of the strain that frayed at him. He was suddenly tottering weak, his belly sick and twisting.

Still beside him, Ungo studied him with worried eyes. "Look, Jarl: You're done. Lay down before you fall down."

Jarl braced his arm against the cabinet of the viziscreen. "How can I rest?" he mumbled, and knew himself that he was mumbling. "Even if we make it, what happens to the raider fleet—and to Ceresta? This new weapon"

"Can you help more if you're dead?" the Jovian badgered. "Will things be better if you fall over?" He gripped Jarl's arm. "Come on! I'm putting you to bed, whether you want to go or not!"

Numbly, Jarl let himself be led into the commissioner's own tiny private cabin. Wordless, he sagged onto the bunk.

Ungo backed out again and closed the door.

Flat on his back in the pulsing stillness, Jarl closed his eyes.

But sleep would not come. His brain was a screen, alive with a vivid, ever-shifting kaleidoscope of form and color. Again and again, his mind flicked back to Sais and Wassreck to the raider fleet, the wild

rovers and fighting men he knew so well to Ceresta's teeming streets, and the cold, bleak beauty of the hills and plains of Pallas.

And to Ylana.

Shifting, he opened his eyes and stared up at the dully gleaming ceiling.

Where had the girl gone? Why had she not been in her room?

Above all, what strange lust had led her to flay him as she had, before the highest officers of her father's fleet?

Jarl frowned and rubbed his aching forehead. The girl's willingness to bring down upon herself the shame of beating a shackled prisoner was a hard thing to explain.

Could it be that she indeed had alien blood—a strain from some sadistic barbarian breed? Narrow-eyed, he tried to recall her face more clearly the shadow that hung over her slim blonde loveliness. Or—he frowned again—perhaps that shadow truly hid a secret—the secret of a twisted mind set in beauty's body, irrevocably warping over into madness.

He moved to a more comfortable position, still staring up at the blank inscrutability of the metal ceiling. A play of light and shadow caught his eye. Idly, he followed its shiftings—first slow, then suddenly abrupt, then slow again.

Little by little, an uneasiness crept over him. New tension began to crawl in his midriff.

He loosened his belt and pulled

the wrinkles from his tunic; moved from side to side.

But the uneasiness grew. He could not make it go away.

Biting his lip, he lay back, still searching for the cause.

Overhead, the shadows on the ceiling slowly began to shift again.

It came to him, then: He was lying motionless, allegedly alone in this cramped room—*yet the shadows were moving!*

There could be only one answer: Someone else shared these quarters with him.

THE hair on the back of his neck crawled. Grimly, he wondered what the odds on his life would be if it turned out that some *Perrod* guard had been trapped here when the carrier took off.

Twisting in the bed, he let his hand fall across the haft of his knife.

The shadows overhead flexed a fraction.

Ever so slowly, ever so carefully, he turned his head, looking sidewise down at the floor.

A heel was drawing out of sight beneath the bunk.

Jarl gripped the knife. Silently, he twisted still further, till he was in position to strike.

Only then did he speak—coldly, with all the menace he could muster: "Come out—or I'll kill you!"

The whisper of a quick-drawn breath broke through the stillness, then died again in utter silence.

Jarl poised; drew back his knife.

"All right, then, curse you—!"

Clothing rustled. A voice choked, "Wait, Jarl Corvett—! I'm coming"

A strangely familiar voice

Again there was the rustling. A head moved into view from beneath the bunk, already turning a woman's head, crowned with a nimbus of golden hair.

It was Ylana.

CHAPTER IV

A DRAGGING eternity of silence echoed in the tiny cabin. Jarl's knife-hand fell. He groped for words that would not come.

Coolly, the girl slid out from under the bunk and, supplely graceful, rose to her feet. Ignoring Jarl, she straightened the sleekly-styled blue Federation tunic that accented rather than concealed the smooth curves of her slim young body. When she looked up, her grey eyes were mocking, half-disdainful. "What, raider? Have you never seen a woman, that you must stare so at me?"

"You—? A woman?" Jarl spat. "Your own sex would disown you! You're more mad *ban* than human!" He clenched his fist. "By H'sana's virgins, I should kill you!"

Ylana tossed her head—uncringing, defiant. The golden hair rippled. "Is that your raider's way, then? To kill the one who gives you life?"

"Who gives me life—?" Jarl cursed. He touched his lacerated face.

"You've given me scars only!"

"Is your beauty such that wounds will mar it?" The girl's lips twisted scornfully. "I thought you'd find my *skrii* worth a few cuts, a little pain, if it would buy you back your freedom."

"The *skrii*—? The knife?" Jarl choked. "You mean—it was you who gave it, not the *Malya*—?"

"Who else?" she shrugged, and her contempt bit like the telonium blade's own razor edge. "Did you think I'd shame myself, beating a prisoner before my father's men, without reason?"

Jarl rocked. "But why—?"

Once more, Ylana's slim shoulders lifted. She smoothed her hair, with elaborate deliberation. "You were too closely guarded for me to reach you in your cell. But it came to me that if I made a show of hate, I could trick my father into bringing you to the great hall so I could confront you before all, at the banquet. The beating—it was the only way I could devise to pass the *skrii* on to you."

Jarl studied her. But her eyes were clear, her smooth face guileless. The shadow of a smile played about her mouth.

He frowned and gestured helplessly. "Does not even a woman need some reason?"

"I had a reason," she said, and of a sudden she was no longer smiling. "I had so great a reason"

Abruptly, half-turning, she broke off. Her eyes left Jarl's, and he

saw that her hands had tightened to white-knuckled fists. Her breasts rose and fell too fast beneath the tunic.

He waited, not speaking.

Still looking away, her voice the barest whisper, she said, "I learned the truth at last, Jarl Corvett"

"The truth—?"

"About freedom, and the Federation as a partnership of plunder. About my father, and that renegade *chitza* Wassreck." Her voice broke. Her eyes came back; met Jarl's. "Raider, how can I tell you? Wassreck has betrayed you!"

"Betrayed me—?" Jarl went rigid. In two quick steps he was beside her—gripping her chin; staring down into her eyes. "Not Wassreck—!"

"Yes, Wassreck!" Her words came tumbling forth in a rush, raw and defiant. "He was not captured, Jarl Corvett! He surrendered!"

"You lie!"

"No! Of his own free will, he sent ■ secret message to my father! He had a new weapon, he said—a projector that would break your raiders' power forever. He offered to give it to the Federation, if in exchange they'd lift the brand of outlaw from him and award him a post of proper honor."

NEW fury gripped Jarl Corvett. "You lie!" he lashed again. "You lie in your teeth, you she-quirst! This is some sneaking scheme, a fil-

thy trick to match the one you played back there in the banquet hall—”

“No, no The girl’s voice choked with pain. Tears spilled down her cheeks. “My jaw—you’ll break it—”

Jarl let go her chin.

White patches from his gripping fingers marked her face. For an instant, shame flooded through him. Yet, somehow, in the tension of the moment, it only added to his fury. Savagely, he turned away and paced the cabin. “Curse you, Ylana!”

She looked away. The grey eyes were dull, her face deep-shadowed. “I know, Jarl Corvett. You still hate me. You wonder why I should do this thing—give you my *skrii*, tell you all I’ve told, hide here on my father’s carrier so that you would take me with you ” Her voice broke. The tears coursed faster. “All my life, my father’s talked of duty. But now, with this new weapon in his grasp, he would keep it secret till he can sweep the asteroids clean for the wealth that’s waiting to be seized. He talks of perquisites of office, claims it as his due for his years of service ”

Chill, narrow-eyed, Jarl weighed her words. “So, now, you’d turn against him?”

She hid her face. Her voice came muffled. “It was more than I could stand, Jarl Corvett—that you should die for loyalty, while my father loots the Belt, and Wassreck basks in honor. Now,”—she raised her head,

red lips aquiver—“now, at least, I’ve warned you. You can flee somewhere—perhaps to the dark worlds beyond Pluto ”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps—? What else is there for you to do?”

Tight-jawed, Jarl slapped his hands against his hips. “I can still go on to the outlaw worlds. My ship can still ramp at Ceresta.”

“Ceresta—?” The eager light faded from her face. She drew back, staring. “But why, Jarl Corvett? Don’t you understand what I’ve just told you? The raider worlds are doomed!”

“So you claim,” Jarl nodded. “But Wassreck proved himself to me at Horla. Do you think I’d forsake him now, on your word only?” Grimly, again, he paced the tiny cabin. “No, golden Ylana! You—you’re still *rey* Gundre’s daughter!”

Her hand came to her throat. “You mean—?”

Rock-faced, he towered over her, fighting down all impulses to gentleness, to mercy. “I mean that whether you tell the truth or not, your father’s still the high commissioner. How can I trust you?”

He could see the pulse beat in her temple. “Then it means nothing to you that I hid aboard the carrier, here, to warn you? I pledged my life—”

He nodded curtly. “Yes. You pledged your life. And now it’s forfeit.” Turning on his heel, he

strode to the door and flung it open.
"Ungo!"

The Jovian turned from the vizi-screen. "What, Jarl?"

"Come here! We've got our hostage!"

"Our hostage—?" Big Ungo lumbered to the cabin's door, then stopped short, gaping. "Jarl—! The woman—!"

"Yes, the woman! Ylana, the commissioner's own daughter!" Even as he said it, there was a sickness in Jarl Corvett. But he put false triumph into his voice to cover the things he felt. "She came of her own free will, old comrade, with a fool's wild tale that Wassreck had betrayed us!"

THE girl stood rigid. Her mouth, her throat, were working. Then furiously, she stumbled forward and ran to him. Her fists beat a drum-roll against his chest. "You *chitza*—!" Sobbing, she broke off; turned to face Ungo and the staring crewmen. "A fool's tale, he calls it! He'd go on to Ceresta!" She choked. "Must all of us die for this one madman? I tell you, your sainted Wassreck has surrendered and given the Federation his newest, most deadly weapon! I came to warn you, so that you could flee to outer space—"

Jarl caught her arm. Sharply, he twisted. "Enough, you she-*quist*! Even if you believe you tell the truth, you're more the fool to think so!"

Wincing, doubled with pain, she

twisted. "What do you mean?"

Jarl laughed, and the sound came out less mirth than anguish. "Did you forget that Wassreck's own daughter, Sais, is at Ceresta? Would he cut loose your father's Federation fleet, arm his deadliest foe with a new weapon, knowing that Sais and the raiders would die together?"

The girl's face paled. "No—! No, it can't be—"

"It can't be, but it is. Sais came to me there, to beg me to try to save her father!"

Ylana swayed. Her lovely face was a mirror of shock. Helpless, grey-eyes tear-brimming, she twisted in mute appeal to the other raiders.

Ungo said: "It's true, woman. I was there with him."

"But it can't be . . ." The words came out almost a whimper.

Across the room, the viziscreen's communicator bell rang shrilly.

Jarl let the girl's arm fall. Muscles stiff, belly tight with tension, he strode to the screen and spun the dials swiftly to the cross shown on the communicator unit.

A room took form upon the screen, a bleak, bare, metal room where blue-uniformed Federation crewmen moved to and fro.

Ungo clipped: "The screen-room—! The screen-room of Gundre's own fleet flagship, down on Vesta!"

Mute, Jarl Corvett nodded; focussed.

NOW a new figure appeared before the screen the iron-

backed, handsome figure of High Commissioner *rey* Gundre. Deep lines etched his lean face. His hair was mussed, his tunic-collar open. But he stood erect, and his eyes were cold as Pluto's ice-things.

His voice came, harsh and savage: "You *starbos*! If you've laid one finger on my daughter, I swear by every god from here to Arcturus that you'll die by inches!"

A spark of quick admiration touched Jarl Corvett; and with it came flooding a feeling that was almost pity.

But he held his face cold, and twisted his lips in a mocking, mirthless smile. "Brave talk, Commissioner!" And then: "You can have her back, you know in exchange for *Ktar* Wassreck!"

rey Gundre's mouth twisted. "You *chitza*! You know he's gone!"

"Then get him back."

"From the *slan*-chambers, the Venus headquarters?" *rey* Gundre cursed.

"From hell, if need be!" Jarl took a quick half-step forward; stood with hands on hips, feet wide apart, in fierce, cold-eyed defiance. He let his voice ring: "The choice is yours, Commissioner! How much do you love her? Take your pick now! It's her, or *Ktar* Wassreck!"

The older man brought up a fist that shook with fury. His face worked in a twitching spasm. "I'll blast you, Corvett! By the gods, I'll blast you—!"

"Blast, then," Jarl shrugged.

"Blast, and be damned! But remember—your daughter's with us!"

Things happened to the other's face, then things that were not good to see. The cheeks sagged, and the mouth went limp, and the eyes' fire dulled to coals of pain. Of sudden *rey* Gundre was no longer the high commissioner, but only a shriveled husk of a man all at once grown old beyond his years.

He swayed, then turned, as if he had forgotten Jarl and the raiders. "Atak, what can I do—?" It was a plea, a supplication.

His *Malya* aide moved into view beside him on the screen. The dark, rough-hewn face had the set of granite. "Corvett . . ."

Jarl forgot his pity. Sudden needles of tension pricked at his neck. "Yes."

"Tell me, raider—have you heard of *Ktar* Wassreck's new projector?"

"Yes."

"And that we've already set it up—that this moment it's geared for action?"

Woodenly, Jarl nodded.

The *Malya*'s eyes grew black as the void. "Then know another thing, Jarl Corvett! Know that we've plotted your course as you ranged off from Vesta."

Chill tendrils brushed Jarl's spine. But he held his face blank, without emotion. "And so—?"

"So you, too, have a choice to make, raider—the choice between coming back, or trying to cross the void in a short-flight carrier."

JARL shrugged and forced the thin vestige of a smile. "A good threat, *Malya*. It might break me—if I believed it."

"But you do not?"

"No projector has the range to reach my ship from *Vesta*."

"More power lies in cosmic dust than you can dream of, raider." Atak's eyes were bleak, his dark face set in a mask of menace. "You've made your choice, Corvett! Now set your cross for your own ship—and live with the decision!"

The viziscreen went blank.

"Jarl . . ." whispered Big Ungo. "Quick, Jarl, get a cross on the ship!"

The crewmen's voices were muttered echoes.

With an effort, Jarl kept his movements casual. Wordless, he spun the dials.

The *Ghost*'s looming bulk took form, drifting through the emptiness of space.

In the stillness, Atak's voice blared through the audio unit. "Are you ready, raider? Are you watching?"

Jarl cursed him.

The *Malya* laughed harshly. "I press a button . . ."

Numb, stiff with tension, Jarl stared at the screen, hardly conscious of the crewmen crowding round him.

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then, before his very eyes, the *Ghost* began to glow.

It came slowly, at first—the

faintest touch of pale phosphorescence.

But with every heartbeat, it shone brighter. In seconds the hull was weirdly agleam as with some strange, penetrating light.

Then the ship rocked wildly. He could see the plates begin to buckle.

"No—!" screamed a crewman. "No! My brother—!"

Wallowing, the *Ghost* flamed bright as a *thes*-wood torch. Proton cannon streamed blazing, aimless death. The hull began to cave, then burst asunder. Like an *eidel*-bomb exploding, it tore apart in great, flaring sections that blasted out through space, beyond the viziscreen's frame edges.

Slowly, the weird light faded; died. The blackness of the void closed in.

Like men paralyzed, the raiders stared unspeaking into the awful emptiness where short moments before the *Ghost* had drifted.

It came to Jarl Corvett that he was trembling. Numb-fingered, he reached out and snapped off the viziscreen.

The sound of the switch triggered loose the tension. At his elbow, Ylana burst into hysterical, wildly-triumphant laughter. "You see—? Will you believe me now, when I tell you what fate awaits you?"

Pivoting, Jarl slapped her across the mouth with all his might.

She crashed to the floor against the carrier's farthest wall; lay there in a crumpled, moaning heap.

The crewmen fell back a step, all eyes on Jarl. He could not read their stony faces.

"Jarl" Ungo's voice was shaking. "Jarl, you saw it—?"

The others' words were sullen echoes.

JARL moved away from them a fraction, till his back was against the viziscreen. He let his hand hang close to his ray-gun.

He said: "We're wasting time. Even in this carrier, we still can make Ceresta."

They stared at him, all of them—Ungo, Ylana, the three hard-eyed crewmen. Then, suddenly, a *Chonya* blurted, "You're mad, Jarl! What chance would we have against that projector?"

"You can forget the projector." Jarl jerked his head in the direction of Ylana. "As long as she's aboard, they won't dare use it."

"But across the void" The raiders exchanged fearful glances.

"Would you rather die on Venus?"

Big Ungo shifted. "But Ceresta, Jarl—it's too far to go. There are other places nearer, safer."

"And the raider fleet—?" In spite of himself, Jarl's voice was bitter.

"The fleet—?"

"How long do you think the Federation will wait to strike, now that they've got this new projector?" Jarl laughed, harsh and curt. "By now, the armorers will be fitting them into every ship. Tomorrow

they'll be blasting down on Ceres."

He could see new fear come alive in the others' eyes. It put iron in him.

He lashed out: "Are your own necks all that you can think of? Does it mean nothing to you that good friends will die and, with them, all freedom? — That the outlaw worlds at last will be forced to bow their necks to the yoke of the Federation?"

The others' eyes fell. The raiders looked away and shifted.

Jarl said: "That's one of the reasons why we're going to Ceresta. With *rey* Gundre's daughter there, the Federation fleet will hold off striking."

Big Ungo looked up, still half-sullen. "You said that was one reason. What others are there?"

A knot drew tight in Jarl Corvett's belly. "We came to Vesta to save *Ktar* Wassreck. Now they claim he has betrayed us."

"But what—?"

"Sais is at Ceresta." The knot drew tighter. "If it's true, if Wassreck has gone over, then we'll need her for a hostage."

Again the silence echoed.

Then, suddenly, the *Chonya* crewman cried, "To hell with that! You don't give a *filan* for Ceresta!" His voice went raw with angry passion. "We know what you want! It's Sais you're after—not as a hostage, but a woman!"

Face contorted, he clawed for his blaster.

Jarl whipped up his ray-gun—twisting, firing.

The *Chonya* crashed back, dead.

Hate seethed in Jarl Corvett, a boiling, red-hazed murder-fury. He shook in a spasm of unbridled passion.

"You *chitzas!*" he shouted. "I'll kill you all—even you, Ungo—"

The great Jovian's face twitched. But there was no fear in it. Bleakly, he lumbered forward, towering. His deep voice rasped: "Kill ahead, Jarl. Any time you want to." His massive shoulders seemed to draw together. "I'm with you now, Jarl. I've always been. But I'll speak my mind when I think I need to—to you, or the devil!"

Jarl's tide of fury ebbed and died. The ray-gun dropped to his side, and of a sudden he was shaking. "Ungo ."

"I know, Jarl. It doesn't matter." Ungo's taloned hand was like a steadying pillar. "Go ahead. Give your orders."

Numb, sick, Jarl Corvett slowly straightened, and breathed deep.

He said, "Our course is still Ceresta!"

CHAPTER V

CERESTA: Port Royal of the void; sprawling, anarchical capitol city of the outlaw worlds.

Here were burrows of Rhea's spider men, and *Pervod* cones, and *Fantay* spires. Hive-like Mercurian domes rose amid the flat-roofed

dwellings of the *llorin*. Throbbing *Transmi* drums beat out their savage rhythm, echoing over voices that spoke in Pluto's clacking accents and the reptilian sibilances of creatures from the ammonia-and-methyl swamplands of Saturn and the Rings. There was the acrid smell of Rogek gas and rocket fuel—and the stink of the bulbous, grub-like *Mah'ham* that fed on their own dead. Here a rover could dine on t's'krai of Callisto, or haggle over the price of one of Neptune's fire-jewels or have his brains beaten out with a genuine Torod mace.

For this was a warrior's city, haven of the wild, blood-lusting raiders who made the asteroid belt their home. Fighting men from half-a-hundred satellites and planetoids and planets, they gathered here by their own choice, drawn together in one vast cutthroat brotherhood of booty. Old names, old fames, were left unmentioned. The hulls of the battered ships that ramped in the vastness of the sprawling port bore no Federation registration symbols.

Now, in the shadowy dusk that characterized this strange, warped world of Ceres, the carrier of High Commissioner *rey* Gundre came limping down.

Jarl Corvett brought the craft in himself.

He waited till the shadows verged on darkness, enough to hide the carrier's insignia; then picked a spot far off from the tower, out where the port bordered on the old

native quarter, and let the ship drop down her gravicomps dead like another, blacker shadow.

The carrier rocked in to a silent landing. Rising from the control seat, he strode to the hatch.

But Big Ungo was already there before him—blaster on hip, massive shoulders straining at the fabric of an appropriated Federation tunic. "Jarl, you can't go alone . . ."

Jarl Corvett smiled thinly. "I've got to, Ungo."

"But there may be trouble . . ." The Jovian brought up his one hand in an angry gesture.

"I know. That's why you can't go. I need you here on board more than I do with me." Jarl dropped his voice; jerked his head towards the cabin where Ylana lay. "Stay with her, Ungo. We can't afford to lose her."

"The men—"

"Would you chance it? Would you trust that much to them?"

For a moment their eyes clashed. But the questions held their own bleak answers. Muttering, half-sullen, the big Jovian moved aside.

Jarl said: "I'll be back, Ungo." Silently, he dropped out the hatch to the ground and strode towards the dim lights that marked the ancient, scabrous buildings which fringed the port.

But every step was a coal for the dull fire of tension that burned within him. Would he really be back? Would he ever see the carrier again, or Ungo?

Or Ylana . . .

He wondered.

THE native quarter closed in about him, heavy with the stench of age and rotting garbage. *Vocorn* pipes wailed, thin and minor, and strange eyes stared at him, luminous in the descending night. Once he stepped shuddering into the protoplasmic slime of some primitive life-form as it writhed its way across the mud-choked cobbles; once, through a doorway, he glimpsed a snake-woman's sinuous dancing in the light of flaring *thes-*wood torches.

But he hurried on, still wrapped and trapped in his own dark thoughts.

Again and again, in spite of him, his mind flashed back to Wassreck. *Ktar* Wassreck, tortured genius, who'd come for him at Horla.

Could betrayal find a haven in such a man?

Jarl Corvett cursed aloud. It was beyond the believing.

Yet if it were true

A chill shook Jarl. Where did loyalty lie, in man or duty?

Especially if that duty were only to a dream, the way of the raider

He could find no answer. Savagely, he kicked a whimpering *bok* from his path and pushed on through the darkness.

And Sais what of her? Would he find her waiting, or vanished?

What would she say? How could he tell her?

Tight-jawed, head down, he hurried on the faster.

Then, at last, he was striding out into the Place of the Raiders crossing the open court to his own quarters.

He tried the door.

It was locked. Angrily, he beat on it with a heavy fist.

A rustle of sound came from within. The door opened a crack.

Belligerently, Jarl shoved inside.

A hard object gouged his back.

By sheer reflex, he tried to leap aside, to whirl.

But rough hands seized him. A powerful arm jerked back his head, the wrist-bone jammed so hard against his throat that he choked and gasped for breath, his struggles unavailing. Close to his ear, a rough voice rasped, "Give up, you zanat, or I'll break your neck!"

Already the blackness was swimming with sparks and stars. Reeling, Jarl called ■ halt to battle.

"That's better!" the voice rasped. And then: "All right! We've got him! Let's have some light!"

The inner door opened. A yellow glare flooded the entryway. Staggering, arms locked behind him, Jarl was dragged into the room beyond.

Blinking, he stared into familiar faces . . . the cold, hard-bitten faces of the chieftains of the raider fleet—Toran the *Malya* the mongrel, Tas Karrel Bor Legat of Mercury half-a-dozen others.

And there was another with them, not a warrior one whose dark, proud, lovely face was pale beneath its color.

Jarl choked, "Sais—! What have they done to you—?"

THE woman who was *Ktar* Wasseck's daughter pulled together the torn bodice of her kirtle. A sudden flush replaced her pallor. "Ask them, Jarl." The fine, dark eyes with which she swept the raider chiefs were bitter, scornful.

Jarl stood very still. Cold-eyed, seething, he looked from one captain to another.

He said tightly: "You know this woman. You know she's under my protection. Who among you saw fit to lay hands on her, in my own quarters?" And then, with special, deadly emphasis: "Who *dared* to do it?"

But the chieftains' eyes threw back his fury. Their faces stayed hard, bleak, impassive.

"You *starbos*!" Jarl lashed. "Are you afraid to talk? Have you left your tongues on Pluto?"

The chiefs exchanged glances. Then, almost idly, Bor Legat moved forward—Bor Legat of Mercury, Bor Legat the ruthless. His lean body's shell-plates clacked in the stillness like tiny castinets. The basilisk eyes were like diamonds.

"Corvett," he said gently, "we're not afraid. Maybe this will convince you."

One arm appendage whipped up.

The splayed, tentacular digits stung Jarl's face like flicking lashes.

Jarl rocked in a red haze of fury. "Bor Legat—"

"I know. You'll kill me." Chill, casual, the Mercurian crossed to the chart table and slouched down on one radial hip. The tentacular digits wrapped around the proton grenade that served as a chart-weight and swung it idly to and fro.

To Jarl, the ticking seconds were like eons. The tension rising in the room was almost a living thing. He waited, not speaking.

At last Bor Legat raised the basilisk eyes to him. "Word travels fast, Corvett. We know you've got *rey* Gundre's daughter."

Jarl stared. "That's why you're here—?"

The Mercurian shrugged. "What else? And what better place to trap you than your own quarters?"

The other raiders nodded.

"And Sais—?" Jarl queried tightly.

"We needed her, to force your hand."

Jarl shot a quick glance at the woman. She stood as before, straight and proud, one hand to her bodice. Her dark eyes spoke unreadable volumes.

Bor Legat laughed softly. "She wants your help, Corvett. I hope that she'll get it."

JARL turned on him, voice raw and scalding. "Quit talking in riddles! What is it you're after?"

"You're not that stupid, Corvett." The Mercurian swung the proton grenade a fraction faster. "We want the girl, of course; Gundre's daughter, Ylana."

"Why?"

"To drive a bargain." The faintest hint of urgency crept into Legat's tone. "We know why you stole her. You're out to save Wassreck."

"And you—?" Jarl put scorn into his voice.

"Death comes to all raiders. Why should a traitor's tale be different?" The Mercurian lowered the grenade and leaned forward. "You can have it straight, Corvett: *rey* Gundre's made us an offer. If we give him you and Ylana, he'll spare Ceresta."

"And you believe him—?" Jarl laughed harshly. "No wonder you came here! You're mad as a *ban*, Legat! How long do you think he'd hold to his promise?"

"Long enough," the Mercurian clipped curtly. He sat back once more. Again, idly, he swung the grenade like a deadly oval pendulum.

Jarl said: "Maybe there are some things you don't know—about Wassreck; about his new projector—"

"Yes; we've heard about it." A veil of craft and malice drew over the basilisk eyes. "You see, we've got it, too, Corvett."

Jarl started. "You've got it—?"

"You heard me." Bor Legat's smile grew to a ghoulish grin, leering and macabre. "Sais gave it to us."

"Sais—!" Jarl swung sharply.

The woman's ripe lips quivered. Once more her color deepened. "Yes, Jarl. I knew the secret. I gave it to them."

For a long, taut moment, Jarl studied her. But as before, the dark eyes were unfathomable.

He turned back to Bor Legat. "So what are your plans?"

"You can guess them, can't you?" the Mercurian chuckled. "All we need is time. You'll buy that for us—you, and the girl, Ylana. Then, when the Federation fleet strikes through the Belt to blast us, we'll have a surprise of our own all ready and waiting for them."

"I see." Jarl nodded slowly, but his mind was racing. Then, pouring savage scorn into his voice, he lashed out at the raiders: "Are you utter fools, you *chitzas*? Do you rate *rey* Gundre as a moonstruck idiot?" He laughed, harsh and curt. "He'll strike, all right; but not the way you expect, nor by the path you hope for! He'll know from the start that you plan to trap him! His ships will break through before you have the chance to trap them—"

HE slashed on, in that vein; and as he talked he could see doubt flare in the chieftains' eyes. Tas Karrel's glance wavered. Toran the *Malya* frowned and shifted.

But Bor Legat the ruthless did not shift or waver.

"We'll chance that," he clipped; and in spite of their doubts, the

others nodded.

Jarl's jaw set hard. "Play it that way, then, if you can." He jerked free of the hands that held him; hooked his thumbs in his belt in a gesture of cold defiance. "If you can"

Bor Legat's arm came down. The proton bomb swung loose at his side as he leaned forward. "If—?" he queried, too gently.

Jarl said: "You need two prisoners to keep your traitor bargain. You've only got one."

"You mean, you won't give up the girl." The Mercurian was almost purring. "We counted on your being stubborn, Corvett. That's why we held your lovely Sais a prisoner. With her to help, I think we can convince you."

With an effort, Jarl held his face immobile. He did not speak.

Bor Legat said: "Torture means little to a man like you, Jarl Corvett. I doubt that it would break you. But if you knew your silence would doom this woman"

Sais cried: "No, Jarl—!" Before they could stop her, she was running to him. She threw her arms around him. "Jarl, they're mad with fear of my father's weapon! If you give *rey* Gundre's daughter to them, they will gamble the fate of the outlaw worlds on their bargain with him—!"

For a moment Jarl held her to him. Her warmth, the softness of her body, brought new strain, new tension. The fragrance of her dark hair stabbed like a knife-blade.

Slouched on the chart table, Bor Legat smiled and swung the proton grenade. "Well, Corvett?"

Again Jarl looked from one raider to another. But their hard faces showed no trace of mercy, no hint of indecision.

Bleakly, he turned back to Bor Legat.

The Mercurian set the proton bomb down on the table with a thud. A grim finality was in the gesture.

"We've got three Earth days, Corvett," he said in a flat, hard voice. "Three days to turn you over to *rey* Gundre." And then: "It could seem three thousand years to your lovely Sais, if you stay stubborn."

ONCE more, the seconds dragged like eons. Again Jarl looked to the raider chiefs, the burly crewmen.

A thought moiled in the far reaches of his brain: *If I could only snatch a weapon*

But even as it came, it died again. What good could any weapon do against so many? Even if he killed Bor Legat, there'd be the others.

The Mercurian said: "We're wasting time, Corvett. Give us Ylana—or we'll get to work on your own woman."

Sais choked, "Jarl, stand firm—! Let them have me; it doesn't matter"

Her voice broke. Jarl held her tighter. Bitterly, he thought of Wassreck, her father, and of Horla.

What was loyalty now, when it made a man try to choose between

Sais and the thin-drawn chance that he might somehow save Ceresta?

Of a sudden he felt as if he were being pulled apart by the conflicting claims of love and loyalty, torn asunder under the impact of a dozen different kinds of duty.

The proton bomb on the table would rend a man less.

The proton bomb .

Bor Legat straightened. He snapped to the crewmen, "Take the woman!"

Never had the basilisk eyes held more deadly malice.

"Jarl" whispered Sais. But her voice held only proud farewell; no tears nor fears, no piteous entreaty.

A raider gripped her shoulder.

Jarl said, "Wait"

He spoke to Bor Legat, but his eyes were on the grenade that stood beside the Mercurian on the table. A tremor of chill fascination touched him as he stared at the safety pin, the firing lever.

"A change of heart—?" Legat smiled his ghoulish smile. "For a moment, there, I thought you'd let us have the woman."

"No, Bor," Jarl Corvett said tightly, and in that moment a raider's own wild recklessness was singing in him. "I've other plans for Sais and you. If they work, she'll live, and so will I—and you, you scum, there'll come a day when you'll have your chance to die by inches!"

"What—?" Bor Legat came erect, as if he could not believe the words

he heard.

Sais' eyes went wide. She tried to push back from Jarl.

A raider crewman reached for his arm.

"You heard me right," Jarl Corvett said. He let his shoulders slump and made as if to turn away. Of a sudden his muscles were tense to aching.

The crewman stretched to clutch him.

But Jarl moved faster. Catching Sais about the waist, he flung her bodily against the raider. Then, whirling, he lunged for the proton bomb on the table.

Bor Legat snatched for his pistol.

But Jarl smashed an elbow into his middle.

THE Mercurian retched and reeled. Before he could recover, Jarl drove past him—clawing the grenade up from the table, jerking out the pin.

"Corvett, no—!" shrieked a raider. Another whipped up a ray-gun.

Jarl spun about. His hand ached with the strain of holding down the spring of the bomb's curved firing lever.

But fierce exhilaration surged within him. With a shout he swung the grenade high above his head, where all could see. "Look, *chitzas!*"

One and all, they froze in their tracks, eyes suddenly aglisten with the glassy sheen of fear. Even Sais' dark, lovely face was all at once a

mirror of panic.

"Shoot, curse you!" Jarl cried, and his voice rang with fierce triumph, with exultation. "Shoot and be damned! Because if I die, I'll take you with me!"

Bor Legat choked, "Corvett—!"

Jarl whirled upon him. "Yes, you *starbo!* Take me! But remember—if I let go this firing lever, the spring completes the contact for me!"

"No—!" croaked Legat, and his shell-like body plates were clacking. "No, Corvett! That thing would blast us all to atoms!"

Jarl said, "That's better." Coolly, he lowered the bomb and held it cradled between his hands. "Sais"

"Yes, Jarl" Quickly, supplely, she moved forward.

"We're leaving now," Jarl clipped. And then, to the chieftains: "If you want to live, don't try to follow."

Hate hammered at him, a living thing—the hate of the wolf-pack that sees its prey escaping. Fists clenched, and gun-hands quivered, and eyes drew to murderous, icy diamonds.

Jarl laughed aloud—scornful, contemptuous. The woman at his side, looking neither to right nor left, he strode to and through the door; closed it behind him.

Sais' taut whisper cut through the darkness: "Jarl, they'll come after us! They'll shoot at a distance—"

Wordless, heart racing, he pushed her forward faster. She stumbled

across the final threshold, out into the night and the Place of the Raiders.

Jarl threw a quick glance back. Already, behind them, the door to the inner room was opening.

Cursing, he lobbed the proton grenade back over his shoulder; then bolted after Sais.

The night exploded into crashing chaos. A wall of force smashed Jarl to the cobbles. Screams and shrieks slashed through dust and smoke and falling debris.

But he was outside, the wall between him and the blast. Scrambling to his feet, he dragged Sais up.

Together, they raced for the blackness of the native quarter

CHAPTER VI

THEY ran through the murk of Ceres' night till their lungs caught fire, and their eyes rolled up, and their quaking legs could no longer hold them.

Then, at last, sobbing and panting, they fell in a heap in a rubble-strewn alley, heedless of time or place or peril.

But that passed, too. Slowly, the pain and weariness ebbed. Jarl's strength flowed back. Once more, he was acutely conscious of the filth, the smells, the slithering vermin. Somewhere afar, the *vocorn* pipes still were wailing.

Sais twisted against him, her ripe body smooth as rippling velvet. When he rested his palm on her

hip, she gripped it fiercely in the darkness. Her hand was hot; he could feel the movement of her quickened breathing.

The muscles in Jarl's belly drew tight. All at once—even here, even now—he could think of nothing save this woman. His fingers trembled as he smoothed her dark hair; touched her eyes, her lips.

She moved closer, till the curve of her cheek lay against his shoulder. The pressure of her body was a silent pledge, an invitation.

Sais She was all passion, all woman.

And all his.

Or was she?

The question came without his bidding. In spite of it. Yet once it had come, it would not go away.

He shifted. But it did no good. The spell of her was upon him, melded of her woman's flesh and fragrance.

She pressed closer.

Rigid, he fought a silent battle and prayed that he would lose it.

Why did he hang back? How could he doubt her?

But in his heart he knew the answer to all his questions.

This woman whose touch made his heart beat faster was more than merely woman. She was Sais herself, *Ktar* Wassreck's daughter.

Once, that had been a bond between them.

Now it rose like a cold stone wall, setting them apart.

Because now, in spite of himself, in spite of loyalty or duty, he doubted Wassreck

A *Pervod's* drunken laugh drifted to Jarl, dull and muffled. The faint, alluring scent of *mafrak* reached his nostrils.

Sais' fingers brushed his throat.

He could stand the strain no longer. Twisting, he pushed her back. "Sais" Even in a whisper, his voice was raw and rasping.

He could feel her body stiffen. "Yes, Jarl . . . ?"

How could he say it? What words could he find?

He blurted: "They said on Vesta that your father had surrendered."

For an instant her shoulders stayed tight and straining. Then, incredibly, the tension left them.

"Yes, Jarl." Her voice was the barest murmur. "They told it true. He sent a secret message to *rey Gundre*"

A NUMBNESS crept through Jarl Corvett. He could hear his own heart pounding in the stillness. "But why, Sais? Why? How could he do it—?"

And her whisper came back: "You mean—you thought he had betrayed you?"

The hurt in her voice twisted at Jarl Corvett. But he threw it off; forced himself to press her further: "You ask—when for his own gain he left you here, to die with the rest of us on Ceres?"

He felt her body quiver, and it was like a knife-stab in his belly.

But when she spoke, scorn edged her words: "You'd believe that, after Horla?"

"What can I believe—?" He broke off; lashed out: "If he didn't, tell me! Why did he go? Why did he use you to bait me into a trap that almost snared me?"

A new tremor ran through Sais' smooth, perfect body. Of a sudden she reached out and once more gripped his clenched fist in the darkness.

"Jarl, believe me"

"Believe you—?"

"The trap was my fault, not his. He sent me a message that came too late. You'd gone before I found it" She choked. "Now I must tell you all—"

"All—?"

"Yes, no matter what I promised." Sais broke off, still trembling; then hurried on. "The projector it was a gamble"

Again she fumbled, halted. Jarl waited in taut silence.

She said: "It draws its power from cosmic dust."

"I know."

"But that was only half my father's secret!" Sais' voice took on a new raw edge. "Did you ever ask yourself how my father learned to utilize that power, Jarl Corvett? Did you ever wonder why it was he who mastered its principle, after the finest scientists of every planet had striven for a thousand years and failed?"

Jarl frowned in the darkness. "You mean—?"

"I mean that it was not he who solved the problem!" Sais' nails bit into his hand. Her voice lost its edge in an eager rush of words. "Jarl, the secret came from another race—from a people who voyaged across the void perhaps from even beyond the stars! Eons ago, they lived and died. But one of their ships had crashed on Vesta. That was why my father built his workshop there—so that he could better study what little they'd left behind them. There was a book with metal pages; he found it deep in the buried wreckage. From it, he worked out the plans for this new projector."

IT made Jarl's breath quicken, that picture—the picture of Wassreck, twisted genius, digging through dead ruins in spite of a torture, pain-racked body. The endless hours, the weary years, the lightning mind and infinite patience—all were part of an old, familiar pattern.

Wassreck's pattern.

But it still was not enough to still the doubts that plagued him. With an effort, he held his voice flat and clipped, emotionless. "So he gave this master secret to *rey* Gundre

"He doomed the outlaw worlds. He left us to die here, at Ceresta."

"No! He did not!" Bitter vehemence rang in her denial. "You fool, the projector itself was noth-

ing! He had to break through the Federation fleet's blockade in order to reach Venus' orbit, and then Womar—"

"Womar—!" Jarl went rigid. He strained his eyes to see the woman in the darkness.

"Yes, Womar, the satellite that hides behind the mother planet!" Sais writhed upright. Again her words came fast and eager. "There was another ship, Jarl Corvett—another craft built by that same ancient master race somewhere across the void! If my father can find it, it will mean the end of the Federation! It will buy the outlaw worlds their freedom!"

"But Womar Choking, Jarl came up beside her. His thin-stretched mask of bleakness fell away. "Sais, it's madness!"

"Because of the primitives, you mean? Because of the Federation ban, the deserts—?" Sais laughed aloud, and there was scorn and fury in it. "Yes, Jarl Corvett, it's utter madness! That's why my father went in secret, leaving you behind to call him traitor! He wanted no other to die with him on such a hopeless quest. So he sent his message to *rey* Gundre, wagered his own life on the one slim, desperate chance that he could bring destruction to the Federation!"

The fears, the doubts they all were dying. And as they died, a gnawing sickness grew in Jarl Corvett. Of a sudden he was himself traitor, betrayer, for his very

doubting.

"But why—?" he whispered. "Why did he go, Sais? What secret could be greater than the one he gave to Gundre?"

Sais laughed again, more softly. Once more, she came close to him, as if unwilling, even here, to speak of this thing above a breathless murmur. "The robots, Jarl; the robots!"

He stared. "The robots—?"

"Yes!" Now her voice shook with excitement. "Jarl, they were no idle fancy, no toys brought to being out of an old man's dreams. They were models of warriors—the great, inanimate metal warriors of that alien race from beyond the stars. He built them from plans in the books he found in the wrecked ship."

FOR Jarl, it was as if a curtain had suddenly been pulled aside. His mind flashed back to Vesta, to Wassreck's workshop back to the great hall's echoing vastness, and the towering metal monsters that, shoulder to shoulder, lined its walls.

Sais still was speaking: "He knew that the outlaw worlds were doomed, Jarl. The Federation was too strong. The projector—it was only another weapon. For victory, the raider fleet needed something more."

Jarl did not speak.

She said: "The metal warriors were to be that 'something more'. Not models, such as he constructed, but giants. monsters—huge crea-

tures, indestructible, so mighty that they could break space ships in their hands." The woman's voice rose; took on a richer timbre. "Think of it, Jarl Corvett! Think of an army of those awful warriors, each alone strong enough to desolate a planet! What would power like that mean to the outlaw worlds—?"

She broke off, shaking. With an oath, Jarl pulled her to him; held her.

"But he failed, Jarl . . . Sais' words came dull and muffled. "He could not give them life."

"You mean—?"

"The control was a mystery he could not master. The books told nothing of its workings."

"So now he would go to Womar"

"Yes. There was a chance, he thought, that he might find the secret there, where the other alien ship had fallen. He had a theory that the primitives themselves were decadent descendants of the master race."

"But Womar Jarl's voice trailed off. He thought of the tales he'd heard, the things he'd seen. Of Venus' hidden satellite and its deserts. Of the Federation ban that made it death to land there. Of the beings behind that ban, the primitives, still unconquered, with their savagery and lust for blood and darkly rumored rites.

Tremulous, close to him, Sais whispered, "He gambled his life, Jarl Corvett. In secret, in order that he

would not risk yours nor mine."

In the distance, Jarl still could hear the wailing *vocorn* pipes; the shouts, the shrieks, the drunken laughter. A *thes*-wood torch was a flaring pin-point in the blackness. He rolled the acrid taste of Rogek gas about his tongue drank in the *Mah'ham's* stench.

Yes, this was Ceres, a Cerestan night, and he was here, with the warmth and softness of dark Sais pressed against him.

Yet another part of him was far away . far, far away in time and space and circumstance, armoring his quivering belly in a surface plate of boldness as he strode out on Horla to face the agony of the flame-death.

And there was Wassreck, too, *Ktar* Wassreck, with his burning eyes and pain-racked body, blasting down through the holocaust to save him.

Loyalty it was such a feeble, tenuous thing.

Yet the bonds it' forged were stronger than telonium or steel.

Again he cursed, and pushed Sais back. Catching her hand, he turned and led her, stumbling, through the darkness.

"Jarl ■

He clipped: "We're going to the space-port. *rey* Gundre's carrier waits for us there."

"And then—?"

"We blast for Womar."

"Jarl—!"

He strode on faster—hurrying, giving her no answer. There were

too many things to say . . . too many words he could not utter.

THEY left the alley for another, broader. A *dau* brushed past them in the murk. Two bulbous Thorians parted, moving out of their way. Curious, glowing eyes of *llorin* watched them from an entryway.

Then, around another turn, the buildings thinned. The odor of Rogek gas and rocket fuel grew stronger.

And, ahead, ■ shadowy group moved from one looming bulk of structure to another.

Jarl jerked Sais back into the blackness that rimmed a cone-like *Pervod* dwelling.

"Jarl—"

He clapped a hand across Sais' mouth. "Quiet! Bor Legat's men may still be here before us!"

Jarl felt a tremor run through her. Ghost-silent, he led the way along the building; then, after a moment's pause, ran on swiftly to an ancient *Fantay* structure.

The shadow-group ahead was breaking up spreading out in a thin black line of menace.

Tight-nerved, Jarl drew Sais to the right, parallel to the skirmish line, along the crumbling *Fantay* spire then on through the burrow-like workings of spider-men of Rhea, past flat-roofed habitat of the *llorin*.

They came out into another alley. But ahead, here, too, he caught a glimpse of motion, the hint of a

far-flung raider cordon.

They tried again, by another alley—the one down which Jarl had come when he left the carrier. He almost imagined he could make out the ship's slim silver form far off in the vastness of the port, in spite of the obscuring night.

But again, between them and the sprawling ramping-place, stood sinister figures.

Jarl rested his shoulders against the wall of a rambling *jala* hostel. He felt old beyond belief; incredibly weary. His muscles ached with tension.

Sais touched his arm. "Jarl . . ." Her voice was a ragged whisper.

He sucked in air. "Wait here a moment."

Once more, in dead silence, he moved forward, skirting the pool of greenish glow that marked the hostel's entry. Cat-footed, taut, he made his way along the wall towards the port, the shadow-figures.

Only then, without warning, a spear of light lanced through the darkness. An energy-bolt splintered stone bare inches from his shoulder.

He dived back by instinct; landed running.

In the same instant a cry went up—the wild hunting-cry of Bor Leg-at's raiders.

Jarl caught Sais' hand and dashed for the corner of the building.

From behind them came a pelting rush of feet, a babble of fierce, life-thirsting voices. The night blazed with the fire of raider weapons.

Barely in time, they made the corner. Panting, they lunged on into the maze of alleys.

But then, ahead of them, rose other voices. New figures loomed; new weapons flamed and echoed.

Jarl catapulted Sais into an entryway. Savagely, he kicked at the door's lock.

THE door burst open. Beyond lay the blackness of an ebon sack, thick enough to cut. The air that puffed out was stale and dead, heavy with a musty smell of age, abandonment, disintegration.

Jarl pushed inside and heeled the door shut. The clamor of the alley faded.

Breathing hard he groped through the room. Thick dust scuffed up beneath his feet. Sais clung to his hand, fingers slick with icy sweat. "Which way—?" She was half-sobbing.

"Up!" Jarl clenched his teeth. "There's got to be a stair, a ladder!"

They felt their way through another room. Another, and another.

Then: "Jarl—! I've found it!"

Jarl wheeled, moving to her. He touched the edge of worn stone steps. "Come on!"

They climbed through the murk, and Jarl thought of *quirsts* and *hwins*—a thousand deadly, crawling, nameless horrors. But there was no other way, no faintest chance. Tight-jawed, he shoved his thoughts back and stumbled higher.

Three levels they climbed. Then

the stone steps ended. Numb, rigid, Jarl felt his way to an outer room.

Stars shone faintly through a window. Sais still at his heels, he crossed to the casement and looked out.

Far below, the shouts and curses of Bor Legat's men still echoed.

But Jarl paid them no heed. He had eyes only for the flat-topped *llorin* dwelling that crowded next to this structure in which he had found temporary haven.

The *llorin*-pile's roof rose to within short feet of the window. Beyond it lay another; then a *Fantay* spire

Again he said, "Come on!" and levered open the window.

New agitation gleamed in Sais' eyes, but she moved forward, wordless.

Cat-like, Jarl dropped to the *llorin* roof. After a moment's hesitation, Sais followed.

Silent, nerves raw with tension, they picked a path along the beams to the next building and crossed to it.

Here even the beams were rotten, sagging. Testing with his foot at each step, Jarl led the way around the outer wall to the spire beyond.

Even at its lowest point, the edge of the *Fantay* peak was feet above Jarl's head, across a yawning two-foot gap that plunged chasm-like to the ground so far below.

Bleakly, Jarl studied it; measured the distance with his eye. "Up, Sais" He lifted her; tottered

precariously against the rim of coping while, whole body atremble, she balanced on his broad shoulders.

She whispered, "Jarl, I'll never make it." Her words died in a quavering sound of pure hysteria.

A TRICKLE of sweat dripped from Jarl's chin. He dug his fingers into her ankles till her blood spurted and ran down his nails. "You'll make it"

"No, Jarl—! No! I can't—!"

The sweat dripped faster. Jarl could feel Sais' terror. It crawled in her voice and breath and body, quaked and quivered in the very air.

But behind there was only the tender mercy of Bor Legat's raiders.

Ahead, at least they had a faint, slim chance to reach the carrier.

The carrier so near, and yet so far.

Through clenched teeth, he said, "You'll make it—or I'll drop you down the crack!"

He tilted her forward.

For an instant she hung there. He could hear a scream rising in her throat.

Jarl Corvett died a thousand deaths.

Then out she swung, high over the chasm. Instinctively, her hands shot out caught the *Fantay* spire's low-dipping edge clung there

He said tightly: "Pull yourself up! I'll help you!" Bracing himself, straining every muscle, he lifted her

higher higher till her feet were at arm's length above his head.

Panting, crying, she pulled herself half onto the spire.

He let go her feet.

She gasped in new panic. But her grip held firm. Twisting, spasmodically, she swung her feet up and lay there, sobbing.

Jarl's muscles went weak as water.

But he did not dare to hesitate. Stiffly, he swung onto the knee-high coping; crouched there.

The chasm below drew his eyes like a magnet. He tore them away; forced himself to look up, instead, to the spire. Sucking in air, he poised himself, tensing.

Sais stared down at him. Something close akin to horror was in her eyes.

With all his might, Jarl leaped upward, outward, straining to reach the other wall.

One hand touched—and slipped.

The other hooked round the edge of the stone ledge above.

Sais clutched his free hand and tried to lift him. With a desperate effort, he twisted and lunged again, hanging there in space.

This time he got a grip on the ledge's inner edge. Sais tugged at his tunic's collar. Gasping for breath, he levered himself higher, up onto his elbows. A final surge carried him out of the chasm.

Sais sank down beside him. For a long moment they lay there—both panting, both shaking.

But there was no time for weakness. Lurching to his feet, Jarl began working his way around the rim.

THEY moved on to new buildings—one, two, half-a-dozen—always striving in the direction of the port.

Then, at last, they reached a final, ramshackle structure only one level high.

Beyond it, the ramping-place stretched off through the flare-sparked blackness of the night.

Jarl peered down into the flanking alleys. But this time he could find no shadow-cordon, no trace of Legat's raiders.

Sais brushed against him. Once more, he caught the half-forgotten fragrance of her hair.

He pressed her hand. "It looks good, Sais. Legat never thought about the roofs. His men are farther back in the quarter."

"Then—?"

"We'll chance it."

Her lips touched his cheek. It was her only answer.

Together, hand in hand, they slipped down ■ rickety outside ramp to the ground. In silence, they made their way across the sprawling port's scorched cinders.

As they walked, Jarl felt the surface tension leave him. The heavy, mixed smells of Rogek gas and rocket fuel were perfume in his nostrils. His job was done, here at Ceresta. He'd rescued Sais and learned the truth about *Ktar* Wassreck.

Now, he could almost laugh when he thought of Legat.

But underneath, a stronger conflict plagued him. Because, again, it was his destiny to go forth to battle—to lead good men, good friends, to die for the cause of the raider worlds, and loyalty.

Frowning, he thought of Wassreck and of Womar . . . the giant robots. Of Ungo and Ylana.

As for himself, how long could his luck hold? When, at long last, would fate decide to down him?

Shrugging, he veered his course in the direction of a massive marker pylon. What did it matter, when he fell? As Legat had said, death came to all raiders.

For now, it was enough that he should carve his way and do his duty.

Beside him, Sais asked, "How far is it, Jarl? I—I'm so tired."

"Only a little way. Just beyond the pylon." He put his arm about her.

"I'm glad . . ." She leaned upon him.

Jarl veered again. They rounded the corner of the marker.

"Where is it, Jarl?" Sais asked in a weary voice. And then: "Jarl! What's the matter?"

But Jarl hardly heard her. He stood stock-still, staring—unable to move, unable to speak.

"Jarl—!"

He jerked free of the spell of shock; peered this way and that in a frenzy of desperation. Once again,

his heart was pounding.

But the cindered ramping-place stayed bare and echoing and empty.

Carrier and crew alike had vanished!

CHAPTER VII

JARL picked Tas Karrel's ship, the *Knife*. Unswerving, Sais at his side, he stalked up her ramp.

A grim, slim, deadly craft, the *Knife*, black as the heart of her mutant master. The fastest ship in all the raider fleet, with a killer crew drawn from the scum of the whole wide solar system.

The guard at the hatch was such a one—an Earthman, long fled from his own home planet. Slouched at his post below the scarlet signal light, thumb hooked in belt, he stared bleakly off across Ceresta's port and puffed at a *chang* cigarette of Venus.

Jarl's footsteps echoed. The guard swung round.

The next instant he was whipping up his blaster. The cigarette fell from his lips, forgotten. "Jarl Corvett—!"

Jarl laughed, a cold and mirthless laugh, and raised his empty hands. "Put your blaster down. I've come to see Tas Karrel."

"He's not aboard." The Earthman's blaster did not waver.

"I know it. I'll wait."

The guard's brow furrowed. For a moment he stood hesitating, wordless.

Heedless of the menace in the cold blue eyes, Jarl brushed on past him. Chill arrogance in his stance, he strode down the echoing corridor to the crewmen's day-room.

A knot of lounging raiders looked up as he entered, then snatched for weapons. Again his name rang: "Jarl Corvett—!" "It's Corvett!"

And again Jarl laughed his reckless laugh. "That's right. It's Corvett."

A *Pervod* pushed forward. Jarl recognized him as one of Tas Karrel's chief lieutenants.

The creature's chill reptilian eyes flicked from Jarl to Sais, then on to the Earthman guard who had followed them in. "What brings these two here? Where did they come from?"

"How should I know?" the Earthman shrugged. "They say they want Karrel—and I know he wants them."

"Yes. They find it easier to come than to leave us." The *Pervod* laughed harshly and swung back to Jarl. "You, Corvett! We know you! What do you want here?"

Bleakly, Jarl met the reptilian's glare. Feet wide apart, hands on hips, he stood straight and steady, surveying the crewmen who crowded around him.

"I want you!" he slashed harshly.

"Me—?" He could see the lean *Pervod* stiffen.

Jarl let his voice ring. "Yes,

you—and all of these others. The *Knife*, too . . ."

He grinned as he said it, and looked from one hard-bitten face to another—measuring each raider, timing his pause to their grim, deadly potential. He knew them so well, these outlaw crewmen. *Chonya* and *Malya*; *Pervod* and Earthman; *dau*, *jala*, *Fantay*—they were one with him. When his eyes met theirs, it was almost as if he could see their restless minds working.

A SILENCE built up in the echoing day-room. Before it could break, he spoke again to them:

"I need ■ ship!" he said boldly. "A fighting ship, fast enough to break through the Federation's own cordon. And"—he paused—"that ship must have a crew that fears neither man nor devil."

The silence echoed louder.

He said: "The *Knife* is the fastest ship in the raider fleet—and a crew that will raid with Tas Karrel would spit in *rey* Gundre's own eye!"

Still, for a moment, the silence hung upon them. Then, slowly at first, but rising, a ripple of wry, bleak laughter ran through the crowd.

He knew that he had them, then. He leaned forward . . . let his voice drop to a confidential note. "What does a raider want most, my comrades? Loot? *Kabat*? Women—?"

He grinned again, as he said 'women', and lifted a hand to dark

Sais' velvet shoulder.

She twisted. The laughter rippled louder.

Jarl planted his foot on a chair; rested elbow on knee. "Yes, we all want them, my comrades. But"—he dropped his voice still lower—"so do other men."

The raiders crowded closer, craning and straining to hear him.

"Then where's the difference, between us and those others—?" Abruptly, he straightened and brought up his fist. He threw his words at them, in a fierce, ringing challenge: "The difference—? I'll tell you, comrades! It's not loot that we raid for, nor *kabat*, nor women; not really! It's freedom we are after—the freedom to roam the void as free men should, and to hell with the thrice-cursed tyrants of the Federation!"

Now the crewmen, too, shouted, in wild exultation. The din echoed and deafened.

"Are you with me—?" Jarl roared.

But the *Pervod* leaped forward. "You dogs! What of Karrel?"

The shouting died down. Again all eyes came to Jarl Corvett.

He held the smile on his face. "Yes. What of Tas Karrel?"

The *Pervod's* claws crept towards his gun-butt. The bony wings whispered in the sudden stillness.

Very softly, Jarl said, "There's the law of the raiders. A chieftain must meet any man who dares challenge." And then: "You, *Pervod*!

Will you fight hand-to-hand for Tas Karrel?"

The reptilian's eyes glinted. His claws touched the ray-gun.

Scorn rang in Jarl's laugh. "I said hand-to-hand, by the law of the raiders! I came here unarmed, to fight Karrel to the death for his chiefship!"

A low mutter rose from the crewmen. The *Pervod's* eyes wavered.

Jarl said: "Know my pledge, comrades! Not booty, but freedom! If you blast with me, we may all die on Womar. If that doesn't suit you, kill me now, before I meet Karrel!"

The *Pervod* lieutenant's eyes sought out the crewmen. They shifted, not speaking.

Jarl laughed without mirth. "You see, *chitza*—? They want blood—mine, or Tas Karrel's!"

The reptilian looked away—past Jarl, to the doorway. His claws were atremble.

Then, visibly, he stiffened.

Jarl spun around.

TAS Karrel himself stood framed in the entry. His tiny, round, lidless eyes flamed green murder. "You *starbo*—!"

Tas Karrel, the mutant. Broad, tall, heavy-bodied. Hairy as a *dau*, and with a *dau's* bulging muscles. But his face was the blank, hairless face of the *Fantay* . without nose, without cheekbones.

"Welcome, Karrel!" Jarl laughed again, loud and reckless. "I'm claiming the *Knife* and your chief-

ship, by the law of the raiders!"

"A fight to the death—?" The other's lipless gash mouth twisted awry. The green eyes were smouldering. "A pleasure, Jarl Corvett!"

The huge mutant stripped off his tunic, his gun-belt.

His *Pervod* lieutenant cried, "Raiders! A death-ring!"

The crewmen fell back, and linked arms, formed a circle.

Knee-long arms swaying, their chief shambled forward.

Jarl pushed Sais back. The circle parted to pass her.

Karrel's mouth worked. "Jarl Corvett"

"Yes."

"If you die, I claim the woman!"

Jarl's heart pounded. "If I die, you can have her!" He did not dare look at Sais.

The mutant moved into the circle. His prehensile fingers flexed and worked. His blank, grey-white face was a bleak mask of menace, the more fearsome for its very lack of expression.

Slowly, they moved around, ever facing—each searching for an opening, seeking some hint of weakness. The tension climbed higher, in a throbbing crescendo.

Jarl could feel the sweat come to his palms. His pulses hammered.

Then, suddenly, arms flailing, Tas Karrel sprang forward.

Jarl leaped back; jarred against the *Pervod* lieutenant.

Karrel lunged again. Again, Jarl tried to leap aside.

But a clawed *Pervod* foot hooked out and tripped him. He sprawled on the floor.

In a flash, Tas Karrel was upon him. A bulging *dau* arm bore down on his windpipe.

Writhing, Jarl tried to tear free. But the arm would not let him. The prehensile fingers gouged at his eyeballs.

He twisted; rocked back. Bit down on a finger.

Karrel jerked. Jarl bit harder. Lunging, he bucked the mutant forward hooked a hammering heel up and around, into the blank *Fantay* face.

It was Karrel's turn to rock back. The hairy arm lifted.

Jarl brought his chin forward, sucking air in great, choking gulps. He drove a savage blow home below the other's rib-casing.

Karrel tottered. Jarl broke clear; staggered upright.

The mutant threw himself round; started to lunge up.

Jarl kicked him in the face with all his might.

Karrel's head snapped back. His hand clutched for Jarl's ankle.

SAVAGELY, Jarl stomped down on the fingers. He smashed rights and lefts to the grey-white mask face. A cut opened. Grey-green ooze spurted.

Jarl kicked for the belly.

An incoherent cry burst from the gash-mouth. The mutant threw himself over, tumbling towards the

edge of the circle.

A hoarse murmur rose from the crewmen. Wolf-like, arms still linked, they hunched forward.

Jarl's arms dragged like anchors. His ears rang; his lungs burned. Dimly, he glimpsed Sais' panic-strait face at the edge of the circle. The sour stink of his own sweat rolled up in his nostrils.

But he dared not hold back. If Karrel rose, he was finished.

He dived in for the kill.

But the mutant was twisting. His feet smashed at Jarl's breast bone.

Jarl crashed back, clear to the other side of the circle.

Tas Karrel surged upright. "A knife—!" he roared harshly.

The *Pervod* flipped him a dagger. Swaying, he caught it . lunged for Jarl.

It was over. Jarl knew it. There was nothing he could do now.

Nothing but die.

The frenzy of death alone brought him to his feet. He hurled himself at the mutant.

Tas Karrel swayed aside, green eyes burning. Jarl hurtled past him; landed sobbing against the *Pervod*.

The reptilian laughed shrilly. Letting go of the arms of the raiders who flanked him, he caught Jarl . shoved him back at Tas Karrel.

Blindly, Jarl clutched the *Pervod's* belt. His weight carried them both to the circle's center.

Cursing, Karrel slashed for him.

Jarl wrenched to one side. The knife laid open the *Pervod's* side.

The reptilian screamed. His bony vestigial wings flailed.

In the same instant, Jarl caught Karrel's knife-hand. With his last ounce of strength, he wrenched it till the bones cracked.

The knife fell.

Jarl scooped it up. The *Pervod* scrambled from his path.

Tas Karrel stumbled backward. Fear flared in the green eyes.

Teeth bared now, Jarl followed.

The mutant sagged. Then, with a wild cry, hairy body shaking, he whirled and threw himself over the linked arms of his crewmen, out of the circle. In a mad dash, he lunged for the exit.

"No—!" A raider whipped up his blaster. "Death to you, coward!"

He fired. Tas Karrel sprawled on his face in the doorway.

The circle broke into chaos.

Jarl spun about, seeking the *Pervod*.

The reptilian was backing away, slinking towards another door.

"You *chitza*—!"

The *Pervod* stopped short.

"Take your knife with you!" Jarl shouted. He drew back the blade.

Face contorted, the Venusian clawed for his ray-gun.

LIKE lightning, Jarl hurled the dagger. It sank to the hilt in the *Pervod's* throat. Threshing in his death-throes, the creature spilled forward.

Jarl gripped a stanchion. "To

your stations!" he shouted. "We're blasting for Womar!"

Order came from the chaos. Subchiefs bellowed commands. Crewmen boiled out of the doorways.

Sais ran to Jarl's side. Her white cheeks were tear-smudged, but she smiled through her tears.

There was a ringing of bells, a clanging of hatches. A *jala* cried, "All's ready!"

"For Womar—!" Jarl echoed.

A muffled roar cut him short. The room rocked with the shock of the takeoff as the *Knife* slashed its way up from the port, out from Ceres.

Jarl threw one arm around Sais—more for support than from feeling. It was all he could do to stand upright.

She braced him. "You mean it—? We're going to Womar?" All at once her voice trembled.

Shrugging, Jarl rested against her. "You heard my orders."

"But . . . what of Bor Legat *rey* Gundre . . . ?"

"We'll face that when we meet it." With an effort, Jarl straightened. "Now, I've got to rest."

"Of course, Jarl . . ." She moved close beside him, helping him as he limped to Tas Karrel's quarters.

Then they came to the cabin, and she, too, would have entered. But he barred her way. "No, Sais."

"Jarl

"No." He shook his head, closed the door. Heavily, he stumbled to a couch and dropped down.

But though Sais stayed behind, his

own dark thoughts would not.

It was madness, this venture; what other name could a man find for a wild dash for Womar?

Yet what else could he do, with time running out on him? At best, he had three slim Earth days to save Ceres.

Three slim days, less the travel . . .

And Womar . . . What might he find when at last he ramped there? Suppose Wassreck was wrong, and there were no robots? Or if the metal monsters still lay hidden there, how much chance had he to find them?

As for fitting them for battle, mastering the controls that sent them forth

HE shuddered, and his brow seemed suddenly burning hot, as with a fever. Then he chilled. Shaking, drawing covers close about him, he wondered if his wounds had drained him, sapped his strength too low.

But what chance did he have, unless he went on to Womar?

What chance indeed, when even his own kind turned against him!

His own kind, the raiders. He knew them so well—how they felt, the twist of their reckless, ice-edged thinking. And because he knew, it was not in him to hate them or betray them. No; at worst, he could only strive and fail.

And if he failed—? He cursed and twisted. *rey* Gundre would surely blast the raider fleet. The

outlaw worlds would die.

Freedom would die with them.

Wassreck, too.

Three days only for freedom,
and for Wassreck .

Perhaps he slept, then. Or perhaps it was only delirium's distorted screen that drew the twisting patterns across his mind.

Whatever it was, it lifted brain from body moved him up from Tas Karrel's couch—out of the room, the ship itself across the void, through space and time. The hideous, shining masks of Womar's primitives hurtled down upon him out of swirling mists. Madly, he battled strange life-forms in a world he'd never seen.

But he was not alone. for now other faces revolved past him slowly, crying fearful words he could not hear Ungo's face: Ylana's

Ylana—! The red lips smiled and mocked him as she beckoned, and her hair was a rippling pool of purest gold. There was the softness of her body pressed against him; the grey eyes, shadowy as silver pools.

Ungo. Ylana. Where were they? Why had they left him to die back there on Ceres? What could have taken them away?

Now Bor Legat's face came sweeping towards him, basilisk orbs twin mirrors of craft and malice. His body plates were rattling with his laughter—the merciless, cacophonic laughter of the Mercurian who sees his enemy fall and die.

Then another voice was calling, close beside him, and this time he could hear the words, even if he could not understand. They pulled him back across the void, up from the death and tumult of the unknown alien world.

Straining, struggling, he sought to place the tones, the timbre, and as he fought, it dawned upon him that it was Sais' voice, and that his eyes were closed.

His lids were leaden weights, but he dragged them up. Numbly, he forced Tas Karrel's room back into focus.

Sais stood beside him, face strained and drawn. Her words took on meaning: "Jarl—! Quick! Wake up—!"

He lurched from the couch. "What's the matter? What is it—?"

"Quiet—!" Panic was in her raw whisper. "You slept so long, Jarl! We're coming down now, ramping on Womar ."

He pushed back his hair; shook the haze from his eyes. "Then what—?"

"It's the crewmen." He could feel a tremor pass through her. Her eyes would not meet his. "I—I told them too much, Jarl. About Womar the robots. Now they have sent for Bor Legat—"

"Bor Legat—!"

"Yes. They don't trust you. They plan to seize you and hold you "

Jarl cursed. "No! It can't be—"

"What can I say, Jarl?" Her

mouth quivered. "Beat me, if you want to—"

"No." His hands shook, but he fought down his fury even forced a thin smile. "Maybe this way is better, Sais ."

SPINNING round, he snatched up a belt heavy with dead Tas Karrel's weapons and girded it about him.

The woman clutched his arm, eyes wide with new fear. "Jarl! What are you doing—?"

"What can I do?" He laughed harshly. "I'll drop down when we ramp and go on alone."

"No, Jarl—!"

"Yes! Stay in here. Lock the door, so they'll still think they've got me."

"No! You can't leave me!" Her voice rose. She was sobbing. "Please, Jarl! Take me with you—"

Jarl gripped her smooth shoulders fiercely; shook her. "Sais! Listen!" And then, as she quieted: "Sais, once before, I came down on Womar. I've seen the primitives." Involuntarily, he shuddered. "Believe me, Sais, no matter what the crew does to you, it can't match the work of those creatures."

"No, Jarl—"

A dim roar filled the room—the roar of a ramping. Walls and floor vibrated.

"Jarl, I'm going with you!"

The vibration stopped. The cabin echoed with sudden stillness as the great ship came to rest.

"Jarl .

For the fraction of a second, Jarl hesitated. From afar, he could hear orders shouted. Once again, a knot drew tight in his belly.

"Please, Jarl ."

Pivoting, he stared down into Sais' tense, strained face.

Even now, she was lovely . .

But he'd made his decision. There could be no other.

"Sais, I'm sorry . . He drove his clenched fist to the point of her jaw—a short, jarring blow.

He could see the shock glaze her eyes as her head snapped back. Her knees buckled.

"I'm sorry, Sais," he said again, even though he knew she could not hear. Ever so gently, he lowered her limp body to the couch.

He wondered if he'd ever see her again.

But it was no time for wondering, or thinking. He had a job to do, out there in the stretching, scorching, windswept deserts.

Silently, he eased open the cabin door.

The passageway outside was echoing, deserted.

Quick, quiet, he pulled the portal closed behind him and ran cat-footed for the nearest exit hatch.

A Callistan paced to and fro close by it, on guard.

Jarl waited till the creature turned, then leaped and clubbed it down with the barrel of his ray-gun. In seconds, he was spinning back the hatch-bolts.

The hatch swung wide, and night poured in the blistering, dust-choked desert night, pale with the light reflected by looming Venus' unbroken mists and billowing cloud-banks.

Somewhere, out there, were primitives in hideous metal masks, so fierce that even the almighty Federation at last had forbidden this satellite to all men.

Perhaps, too, here were robots . . . towering metal monsters from beyond the stars, brought down by destiny in its strange workings to save the outlaw worlds.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps this seared and storm-swept ball held only the end of Wassreck's dreams and death.

Jarl Corvett smiled a thin, wry smile. At least, he'd know the answer soon.

Breathing deep, he swung out through the hatch and dropped down on Womar

CHAPTER VIII

MMORNING on Womar.

The hot winds were flames whipping at Jarl's face, and the driven sand slashed and burned like pelting needles. Slowly, the night died and, off to his right, the sun rose—fiery, incandescent. Venus, to his left, stretched in a great, shining arc as far as the eye could see. Dust swirled about him in smothering clouds. He wallowed through a sea of powdery, ankle-deep grit where

rocks shoved up in hidden reefs to trap him. Hollows loomed in his bloodshot eyes like chasms, and hillocks grew to mountains up which he toiled on hands and knees, choking and gasping. His cheeks were rasped raw now, his lips all parched and cracking.

Still he lurched onward—lost and disoriented, without destination.

But not without goal.

A goal—? He laughed aloud—the muddled, drunken laughter of a heat-twisted brain. Yes, he had a goal; but it was the goal of utter madness.

For somewhere in this blazing waste, Womar's primitives lay waiting. He knew; he'd seen them charge before. How they sensed an alien's coming was a secret no stranger had ever fathomed. But sense it they did; so they'd hide and wait, till at last the sun and dust and slashing wind had done their work and the invader fell and could not rise.

Then, and then only, they would come, from whatever dark, hidden maze they came from. Their blood-thirsting screams would rise above the howling wind, and their hideous metal masks would flash like mirrors of madness in the white flame of the sunlight.

And after that . . . Jarl choked on his parched, swelling tongue. After that, there would come other things . . . things no alien being had survived, rites so awful as to make this blazing wilderness seem a cool

Elysium.

What was left, they'd spread out in neat display as their own black warning to other straying strangers.

That was his goal: that the primitives should seize him.

Yet now, as the moment neared when he would fall to rise no more, he knew of a sudden how mad it was. Not even Ceresta and the raider fleet were worth it; not even freedom. Nothing could be worth it.

But now, there was no turning back. He'd come too far; he'd pressed his luck one time too many.

Swaying and staggering, he came to another, deeper hollow, where bare rock showed through the dust and sand along the slopes in serrate ledges. At the bottom, the drifting grit lay in smooth-swept whorls like ■ hill-bounded cove where ripples had somehow been trapped in motion, frozen into the surface of the water.

He laughed once, wildly, and lurched ahead; then slipped and pitched forward, tumbling headlong. Rocks gashed at him as he fell—tearing, clutching, as if even they shared the primitives' hatred for all aliens.

Stunned, choked, half blinded, he came to rest at last at the edge of the pool of rippled sand. Here, away from the sweep of the wind, the heat bore down like a smothering blanket. Jarl's brain reeled. He could draw no strength from the air that scorched his lungs. He knew instinctively that no being of his race could long

survive the drain and pressure.

Frantically, he dragged himself up and wallowed forward, out onto the sand.

Even as his feet sank into the sifting dust, he knew he should have gone the other way, back up the slope. But by then it was too late. Deeper he sank, and deeper, till the loose sand was thigh-high about his legs.

DESPERATELY, he threw himself flat, trying to spread the weight of his body. But the grit gave way beneath him, sliding and swirling, hungrily sucking him deeper. Dust clogged his nostrils. When he tried to open his mouth to suck air, sand flooded in.

He floundered wildly, and the thought flashed through his mind, *Do I die here—here, in this whirlpool of shifting grit, swallowed up, buried alive, before I even find the primitives ?*

He struggled again to rise, and could not. The choking dust swirled higher. His senses dimmed. The blazing sun began to darken.

And then they came.

They came with a rush, across the crest, their metal masks blurred to blinding flashes. Out of the clefts of the rocks they came, and up from the sand-pool's edges, howling like the screamings in a nightmare, the wailings of banshees.

Their bodies were brown as the sun-blistered rocks, their shoulder-plumes scarlet as heart-blood. Their

girdles were scarlet, too, and the plumed bands that circled wrists and ankles. Monstrous footgear, broad as their lean, hard bodies, sprayed sand as they charged. Light flared in iridescent splendor from strange, outre' weapons.

Desperately, Jarl tried again to rise. But again, the eddying grit gave way beneath him.

Then they were upon him—seizing him, dragging him up and out of the powder-dry morass that held him. The great webbed shoes they wore did not sink in, but, rather, skimmed the surface.

Vainly, Jarl struck out and sought to struggle. But he was as a child in the grip of giants. The primitives' hands were like shackling bands of steel upon him.

He let himself go limp. After all, was this not the very thing he'd come for?

Unless they killed him here and now

But they carried him back bodily to the sand-pool's edge, to a place where the serrate rocks rose in lowering, brooding ledges. A crevice yawned. Swiftly, they shoved him between the saw-toothed boulders, down into it.

Now other hands reached up from the depths of an inner cavern to receive him. He found himself lifted into the black emptiness of a narrow tunnel.

Then he was on his own feet once more. But the hands still gripped his arms, pushing him along as he

stumbled through the ebon passage. Dimly, he became aware of a strange odor in his nostrils—a sweet yet musty scent he'd never smelled before.

THE passage led on, ever downward. Steadily it grew cooler. Jarl began to lose the sense of draining pressure. His captors jabbered in the darkness. But their speech was like no tongue he'd ever heard before, all consonants and gutturals.

It seemed they hurried on for miles. Then, at last, a dim light showed ahead.

The party halted. Someone clamped a heavy metal mask upon Jarl's head—a mask with neither eye- nor ear-holes. It shut him off in a throbbing private night, through which the guttural voices drifted only as dim whispers.

Once more, the primitives shoved Jarl ahead, and as they moved forward, he had a sudden feeling that they had left the tunnel and come out into a larger room.

Then they were lifting him again; laying him down flat on some smooth surface; holding him there, rigid.

He clenched his teeth, bracing himself for the torture that he knew would sooner or later be his lot.

But no pain came. Instead, of a sudden, the surface on which he lay was vibrating, moving. Air whipped at him. With a shock, he realized that he and the others were hurtling through Womar's heart at jarring speed on some strange trans-

port unit.

It made his spine crawl, just a little. How primitive were these primitives? Had all the worlds been wrong about them? What dark secrets did they hold hidden, here in these black caves that honeycombed the rock beneath this satellite's blazing deserts?

And what of the robots? Where were they hidden?

Or did they exist at all—?

But he had no time to ponder, for as suddenly as the motion had begun, it ended. The rush of air slowed, then halted. Once more, the primitives' hands were lifting him, dragging him forward.

But this time the passageway through which they moved led upward.

The heat rose as they climbed, till Jarl was sweating and choking inside the helmet. Then the slope leveled off again, and he sensed that they had come out into another, larger room. New voices joined the dim whisperings of his escort, till their volume swelled to a tremendous, throbbing chorus. Bodies buffeted against Jarl, milling about him. Hands clawed at him—clubbing, tugging, scratching. He could feel the crowd's hot hate crushing in upon him. The musty, cloying, sweetish odor he'd smelled before grew even stronger till he was sick and dizzy, ready to vomit.

His captors pressed on, not hesitating. Roughly, they led Jarl stumbling up a flight of steps.

At the top, there was a brief halt. Then the faint squeal of massive hinges.

A blast of heat struck Jarl a hammer blow. He reeled under its impact.

From behind, someone gave him a savage shove. He lurched forward.

A new burst of sound smashed at him, even through the metal helmet—a wild shout, torn from a thousand throats, fierce and welling in its hatred. The heat and smell were great sledges, pounding at him.

IN spite of all of his control, Jarl felt a sudden rush of panic. Stumbling, staggering, he came upright—fists clenched, braced to meet the fury of those about him even in his helplessness, his blindness.

But again hands seized him before he could strike a blow. Someone fumbled at the catches of the shrouding helmet.

The metal mask came away. Sound, light, heat, stench, smashed in on Jarl.

He jerked back and threw his hands up across his eyes, trying to shut out the blinding blaze of Womar's sun.

But other hands jerked down his own. Blinking, half blinded, stiff with shock, he stared out incredulously upon a sight such as he had never seen before.

For he stood in the prow of a great space ship—a ship vast beyond the belief of mortal man.

It was old, this ship—old with

an age that staggered Jarl Corvett's mind. Eons were in the sagging plates and splitting arches. The crystals that glinted in the dull, warped metal spoke of untold ages here on Womar. The hull was smashed and shattered, too, and the blazing sun poured in through a thousand great jagged holes and rifts. One whole end of the craft was crumpled, buckled, where it had plowed deep into the rocks and sand as it crashed here.

And it was alien. A thousand differences stood out in line and structure and material. The size alone would have been enough to mark it as having come from outside this solar system. Yet without bulkheads, without bracing, the mass of it loomed as one incredibly vast and far-spreading room—an engineering feat to stagger man's imagination.

And here, too, were the primitives, heirs to Womar's scorched, wind-swept deserts. A thousand strong—ten thousand—they packed the huge hold in a screaming, seething mass, metal masks hideously aglint in the streaming sunlight.

But for Jarl Corvett, ship and primitives alike were mere incidentals. Swaying, staring, he could find eyes only for one thing: the robots.

The robots—! He rocked—incredulous, unbelieving.

But here they were—metal monsters that towered rank on rank in this great hold, like monstrous originals of the figures in *Ktar* Wassreck's workshop. Like a forest they

rose a forest of utter, malign menace.

Their feet alone stood higher than a tall man's head; and the glinting orientation-slots of the great head-units towered so far above the crowd as to have been beacon lights on distant mountains.

Chill, unmoving, they stood here in the hull of this shattered ship as they had stood for ages. But where ship and fittings were decaying, these mighty warriors still shone resplendent, fabricated of some different, finer metal. Strength gleamed in every line of their orange-gold figures. The screaming primitives were only ants that crawled and danced and raged upon them.

STARING at them, Jarl Corvett could only choke and tremble. There was room for but one thought within his reeling brain: *Wassreck was right—! He was right! He was right !*

It made this whole mad gamble worth the while. Even if he died here, all his efforts unavailing, it would still be worth it.

And what could not an army of these giant automatons accomplish? What chance would even the mighty Federation stand against them?

It was destiny. More surely even than he knew his name, Jarl knew that destiny had brought him here the strange, dark destiny of courage and fighting men that ever seemed to ride on the side of the outlaw worlds, and freedom.

But now that he was here, destiny would need a strong right arm to implement it.

His arm.

He swung round, then, with his old, bold coat of arrogance upon him—surveying his captors, searching for some faintest hint of hidden weakness.

But the primitives did not waver. Their eyes stayed cold, leering out at him from their metal masks, grim as the day of judgment.

Those masks . . . With a sudden rush of recognition, it came to Jarl that their stylized patterns were modeled after the head-units of the towering robots.

Such a little thing, that recognition. Yet again, Jarl felt his tension lift a fraction. He smiled a thin, wry smile and waited.

But now, to one side of the stage-like platform on which he and his escort party stood, there was a sudden stir of motion. A new door opened in what had been a bulkhead barring the way to another part of the ancient, fallen ship.

A cry went up from the seething multitude. The mass of primitives surged forward, close against the platform.

Slowly, creaking and groaning, a great stone slab was wheeled forth. Its sides were deep-graven with carved figures . . . strange, hideous figures that writhed in ecstasy and anguish. Stains smudged its upper surface. Heavy metal clamps, long age-corroded, were set into each

corner.

With a sickening jolt, it came to Jarl that it was an altar.

Straining and grunting, a crew of primitives tugged it into position in the platform's center.

Jarl's captors gripped his arms.

The panting group by the altar straightened and hurried back through the door in the bulkhead. Rattling sounds came forth. A moment later, the primitives reappeared, rolling out a monstrous, shining metal tub on wheels, big as one of the kettledrums of the spider men of Rhea. Its sides were graven with the same contorted figures as the altar.

The din of the crowd swelled louder. Masked primitives leaped and screamed in impassioned frenzy.

Tight-jawed, Jarl waited.

The wheeled tub was set in place beside the altar. It moved easily and smoothly. Then, again, the altar crew retreated through the bulkhead.

This time, when they returned, they bore a living, struggling creature.

MAN-SIZED, the thing was like no animal Jarl had ever seen before, with brown, bead-like skin and tiny brain-case. Off-hand, he judged it to belong to some desert species native to this grit-drifted hell-hole, Womar.

The primitives carried it to the altar; clamped its spradled body face up atop the stone with the ancient

shackles. The din of the crowd was deafening.

Somewhere on high, a great gong sounded. The shouts and screaming died away.

In the same instant, a new door opened in the bulkhead. Another primitive stepped forth; paused, posing.

This creature's garb was different from the others! His metal mask was ebon. So were his plumes, his girdle. A great scarlet jewel was set in the forehead of the dead-black helmet. His hands were gloved in sleek jet gauntlets.

Now, while Jarl watched, the posing primitive's arms came up, till the gloved hands were high above his head, displayed, as if they were a symbol.

The throng below stood frozen, rigid.

The black-masked primitive strode forward, to a spot between the altar and the shining metal tub. Swiftly, he lifted the lid that capped the drum-like vat.

Two of the altar-crew rushed forward and held it open for him. Another held out a strange implement that, to Jarl, looked like some crude sort of grease-gun.

The black-masked figure dipped the nozzle of the thing into the tub and worked a plunger, then turned to the struggling life-form shackled to the altar. Deftly, he stabbed the snout of the tool into a spot below the creature's breast-bone.

The captive tried to jerk away, to no avail. With smooth precision, the primitive in black pressed home the plunger.

A gusty sigh ran through the throng about the platform. It came to Jarl that he was cold as ice despite the heat and blazing sun. The musty, sweetish smell he'd caught before swirled about him, even stronger.

The black-masked figure straightened. With quick, sure movements, he twisted at a fitting, then lifted away the tool. The nozzle he left sticking in the creature on the altar. It thrust up from the hollow below the breast-bone like the hilt of a deep-plunged dagger.

The two primitives by the wheeled tub let the lid fall back. Turning, one darted to the bulkhead door. When he came out, he bore a flaring torch.

New silence fell upon the crowd, so complete that the altar crewman's footsteps rang and echoed in the stillness.

He passed the torch to his black-masked fellow.

Black-Mask swung the flaming brand on high and, turning, faced Jarl Corvett. His voice thundered, harsh and guttural.

Jarl stood rock-rigid. The words he could not understand. But the threat, the menace—they needed no translator.

PIVOTING, the primitive stepped back from the altar; thrust out

the torch till its flame touched the tip of the nozzle protruding out of the shackled prisoner's chest.

Of a sudden Jarl's whole body was drenched with icy sweat. He could not move; he could not breathe. The tales of horror he'd heard so many times swirled through his brain.

For an instant, nothing happened.

Then, all at once, there was a puff of sound, a flash of flame above the captive. A great black jet of smoke shot high into the air, out of the nozzle.

The life-form on the altar gave one shrill cry that was agony, incarnate. Its body jerked and twisted, lashing against the shackles in a frenzy.

The primitives went mad. The huge room rocked with their howls and screamings.

But Jarl Corvett hardly heard them.

He'd seen cruel death before, on a dozen far-flung planets.

But this

For while he watched, thin lines of fire were racing along the doomed sacrifice's writhing body. In a spreading network, the flesh itself was bursting open, flames leaping up in a thousand places.

In a searing flash, the truth came to Jarl: *The creature's blood was burning!*

He sagged in his escort's grip, and retched — shock-stunned, sick with horror.

But the primitives who flanked

him jerked him upright. An open hand stung his face with brutal slaps.

The spell that gripped Jarl broke. Numb, tight-jawed, he forced himself to look again upon the altar.

The shackled creature lay there still, a charred, contorted horror.

While Jarl watched, the monster in the ebon mask stepped back and passed the torch to the altar crewman who had brought it. Other primitives unclamped the gyves and dragged the corpse away.

Again Black-Mask brought up his hands. Again the crowd's tumultuous hubbub faded.

Black-Mask's hands came down. He swung about till he faced Jarl. Imperiously, he gestured.

Jarl's captors dragged him forward. The torch-bearer stepped quickly back, out of their path.

Fear was in Jarl Corvett, then—a fear that verged on shrieking terror. His body seemed like a thing apart—a statue carved from living ice, with no relation to his being.

But hate came with the terror, a flaming hate that grew at every step, till its white-hot fire ate up the fear and burned away his sickness and his trembling. Of a sudden he was himself again. He sucked in air. Without volition, his muscles stiffened against the digging fingers of his savage escort.

They jerked him up short before the altar. The black-masked figure shook a jet-gloved fist and shouted guttural imprecations.

THE last shreds of Jarl's terror vanished, washed away in the flood of his tormentor's fury. Out of nowhere, a thing that Wassreck once had said came flashing to him: *Hate is the face of fear, not courage.*

That hate which showed in the primitive's every line and gesture—it, too, was born of terror—welling fear of all and any beings who came down from the skies to Womar.

Jarl laughed aloud, it was so funny—that he and this other should face each other so, in deadly menace, when within they were only quivering twins of terror.

And as he laughed, his own hate died the same swift death to which his fear had fallen. A grim, bleak poise replaced them both. For if the primitives, in their hearts, felt the self-same fear that he had, there was still a chance for recklessness to blaze a path through this wilderness of desperation.

His laugh cut short the black-masked figure's shouting. The primitive stared at him, as if unbelieving.

Cold-eyed, cold-nerved, Jarl drew himself to his full height. Rigid, he probed for some — for any — last wild gambit.

But Black-Mask, too, was straightening. He cried out fiercely to his helpers.

They shoved Jarl forward.

As they did so, the primitive beside the huge, wheeled tank lifted

up the lid.

Jarl glanced down into it.

The vat was full. The awful broth almost lapped the brim. From it, in sickening waves, rose the sweetish, cloying fumes Jarl had come to associate with the primitives.

Black-Mask leaned forward. Shouting again, he lashed out. His jet-gloved fist raked at Jarl's face.

Instinctively, Jarl rocked back. New tides of black despair washed through him. What could he do, locked in his captor's grasp, hemmed between tank and torch-bearer, black-masked fiend and blood-drenched altar?

Tank—and torch-bearer—!

That link in an instant it grew to a searing, surging flame, hotter even than these creatures' own hell-fire brew.

Spasmodically, Jarl twisted round.

The primitive with the blazing brand still stood statue-like at the corner of the great stone slab.

Black-Mask snarled another order. His henchmen jerked Jarl back—lifting him, swinging him upward, till he hung suspended above the altar.

By instinct, Jarl wrenched against them; felt them, too, stiffen in the face of his resistance.

But if he could not fight them, perhaps there was another way

Before they could lower him to the slab, he let himself go limp, loose-limbed and unresisting as any corpse.

It broke their balance. He hit the

stone with a sodden thud lay there unmoving, head lolled back.

For the fraction of a second their grip relaxed.

IT was Jarl's moment . . . Savagely, then, he lashed out with all his might, in a violent spasm of arms and legs and torso. His feet smashed the metal mask into one primitive's face. His elbow sank fist-deep in another's midriff.

The restraining hands fell from him.

Desperately, he threw himself across the altar, toward the torch-bearer. Before the creature could recoil, Jarl was upon him—smashing him down with fists and knees and shoulders; snatching the flaming brand out of his hands.

Falling over each other in their haste, the others lunged to seize Jarl.

But instead of fleeing, he leaped back onto the altar. There was a prayer in his heart—his heart in his mouth. With a wild curse, he hurled the torch straight for the vat of hell-broth.

It struck the open lid, then plunged on down into the liquid.

But even as it fell, the fumes were flaring. Flame and smoke leaped up in a roaring column. A cloudburst of liquid fire sprayed out in all directions.

The cries of the primitives exploded into one great scream of pain and terror. As Jarl threw himself flat, with the altar-stone between him and the tank, he glimpsed the

reeling, flame-cased figure of his jet-masked tormentor—stumbling, falling.

Then the black smoke billowed out in nauseous, all-obscuring murk that swallowed even the thundering holocaust that still roared around what had been the tank of liquid.

Jarl rolled from the wheeled platform on which the altar rested. Bent double, he raced through the choking haze for the bulkhead. In seconds, he was fumbling his way along it to the nearest doorway slipping through and ramming the heavy bolt home behind him.

Ahead, a shaft and spiral stairway loomed. Panting, he sprinted upward, past level after level.

The stairway ended against another metal door.

The outlined figure of one of the mighty warrior robots was blazoned on it.

Jarl's heart pounded harder.

Shoving open the hatch, he half-fell inside and locked it, too, behind him.

He found himself now in a control room. Panels thick with dust lined three of its walls. The fourth was a single massive, transparent, plastic plate through which occupants could look out across the great hold where the robots were massed where brief moments before Jarl Corvett had stood face to face with hideous death.

Stumbling to it, Jarl stared down upon the smoke-smirched scene below. Flames still were leaping

about the platform. Here and there, he could catch dim glimpses of primitives' hurrying figures as they ran among the metal monsters.

OVERHEAD, the dense black smoke almost hid the roof. Eddying, slowly rising, it swirled out through the cracks and rifts in the ancient hull, up into the blazing, sunlit heat of Womar's desert sky.

Of a sudden Jarl was weak to the point of sickness. Numbly, he turned and surveyed the rest of the control room with a closer scrutiny.

Bank after bank of dials and indicators marked with strange symbols leered down at him like a host of huge blank eyes. Against the far wall, units with focussing plates like the viziscreens of his own solar system were ranged in a precise row.

And everywhere—on every panel, every instrument—were stamped neat, stylized images of the warrior robots.

The numbness in Jarl grew. He knew instinctively, without question, that this was the place sought by *Ktar* Wassreck—the brain, the nerve center, for the shining metal monsters that were to have saved the warrior worlds.

But now that he was here, what could he do? His own ignorance was a tight-drawn, all-concealing blindfold.

With time enough, and skill and patience, he might perhaps have worked his way through to an un-

derstanding of how the robots were controlled. But time was the one thing he did not have. Second by second, the precious hours were ticking by. As far as he was concerned—lacking knowledge, training, understanding—he might as well have been on Venus.

And so the warrior worlds would die. The Federation fleet would sweep down on Ceresta.

Already, the three days given by *rey* Gundre were running out.

Jarl shook in the grip of helpless, frustrating fury. He had come so far; yet now that he was here, he could do nothing.

He cursed aloud; and as he did so, a new sound drifted to him.

A familiar sound—the sound of a space-ship's blasting rockets.

He whirled; leaped back to the broad expanse of transparent plastic panel.

He reached it just in time to see a great section in the top of the hull above the hold suddenly buckle and crash down. Sunlight streamed through smoke and dust.

The roar of the blasting rockets echoed louder. A moment later, another huge chunk of hull tore loose and fell. Then another, and another, till the hole showed like a spreading canopy of sky above the robots.

Below, the last of the primitives were fleeing. Breathing hard, pressed tight to the observation panel, Jarl watched and waited.

The rocket-roar took on the pe-

culiar whistling sound that went with ramping. Before Jarl's eyes, a ship dropped down stern-first into the hold and rocked to a landing amid the debris and towering robots.

Now the ship, as well as the sound, was suddenly familiar.

Too familiar.

It was the flagship of High Commissioner *rey* Gundre's mighty Federation fleet!

CHAPTER IX

JARL Corvett lay flat on his belly on the floor of the room that housed the brain of the warrior robots, staring bleakly down into the hold below.

Then, again, he twisted, shifted. This endless waiting—it was enough to drive a saint to murder.

How long had it been — two hours — or two eons?

It was a time for thinking — because there was nothing else to do but think. Escape was not even a thing to dream about by daylight, with primitives still roving through these warrens. Tonight, perhaps, a man might find a way; but for now there was only thinking.

So Jarl lay there on the floor, sweating and shifting. Narrow-eyed, he studied the motionless bulk that was the flagship, and asked himself a thousand questions.

Questions he could not answer.

Why would *rey* Gundre, of all the players in this mad drama,

come roaring down on Womar? What did he seek? How had he found his way here?

Above all, what was he waiting for this way—jets dead and hatches still unopened?

And for him to pick the robot-hold of this ancient ship to land in

Unless, by some wild chance, *Ktar* Wassreck had escaped—

Even the thought made Jarl's heart leap.

But then it quieted down again, drained by the dark, dull hopelessness within him.

The time for dreams was dead and gone. For all his bravado and boasting he, Jarl Corvett, had failed the man who'd come for him on Horla. By now, at best, *Ktar* Wassreck lay a corpse in the chill horror of Venus' *slan*-chambers.

Pain welled up in Jarl, and with it came new sickness. Choking, he buried his face against his arms and cursed the day his mother bore him.

But his mind would not stay still. Drearily, he thought about the others.

About Ungo and Ylana, Bor Legat, Sais

It only brought new anguish. For he'd failed them, too; failed them one and all. Ungo, friend of friends, who'd trusted him beyond all others. Ylana, vision of golden loveliness — betraying her world and her own father just to save him. Bor Legat of Mercury, murderous and merciless, yet

loyal in his twisted way to the raider cause.

And Sais.

Dark Sais, *Ktar* Wassreck's daughter. Even in this place, Jarl could recapture the fragrance of her hair, the pulsing pressure of her perfect body. She was all woman . . .

And all Jarl Corvett's.

So he'd brought her down to this wild world and left her to the mercies of Tas Karrel's raider rabble.

Cursing again, he writhed about and once more stared up at the banks of panels.

But that was all that he could do. He did not even dare to rise and experiment with the controls spread out before him, for fear someone below would glimpse the movement.

Then, from the hold, there rose a sudden clatter.

Jarl swung back to the plastic window, craning and peering.

BELOW, the main hatch of *rey* Gundre's ship was opening. Blue-uniformed Federation crewmen poured out, weapons glinting, and took up positions amid the debris.

In the same instant, the high whine of a light, fast-traveling carrier cut through the hold.

A moment later, a slim, swift craft dropped through the gaping hole in the ancient hull and set down for a landing.

Its prow was marked with Bor Legat's black lightning flash insignia.

Incredulously, Jarl dug his nails into the plastic.

The carrier came to rest. Its hatch swung open. A burly *dau* leaped out.

Instantly, the Federation crewmen came to their feet and crowded round.

But the *dau* ignored them. Turning, he gestured to someone still inside the carrier.

Another figure dropped down . . . a figure with shimmering golden hair and a scarlet tunic that emphasized the slim, ripening womanhood of the one who wore it.

Ylana—!

Jarl caught his breath. His palms were suddenly slick with sweat, the muscles of his chest constricted.

While he watched, the girl moved calmly to the Federation flagship.

The *dau* swung back aboard the carrier. The hatch clanged shut. A moment later, the craft was in the air again, lancing out of the ancient hull and away.

Ylana disappeared into the flagship.

Jarl sank back, trembling. Brow furrowed, lips dry, he tried to make sense of this new maneuver.

It was plain now what had happened to the girl, and Ungo. Bor Legat had captured them that night, back on Ceresta. Now he was carrying out his plan to trade her life for time, and the desperate chance

that somehow Ceresta might be defended.

But why should he meet *rey* Gundre here? What had led the two of them to choose this shattered hulk for their rendezvous?

Jarl looked down once more.

More crewmen were hurrying from the flagship—clearing the debris from around the ramping-spot; setting up a perimeter studded with heavy weapons.

They planned to stay a while; that much was plain.

But why? Why, why *why*—?

The question rang in Jarl's brain like a tolling bell. But he still could find no answer.

Another hour dragged by. Slowly, the shadows of ship and robots lengthened. Hunger gnawed at Jarl's belly. He moved this way and that, trying to work the ache from his weary muscles.

DOWN in the hold, the crewmen moved more slowly. Yet even up here, high above them, Jarl could sense a rising tension. It showed in the way they kept looking towards the burrows into which the primitives had fled their sudden starts, their readiness with their weapons.

He hunched forward, narrow-eyed, resting his weight upon his elbows.

Then there was a flurry about the hatch as a Thorian officer barked orders. The crewmen snapped to smart 'attention'.

A moment later *rey* Gundre himself strode down the ramp, a lean, imposing figure. Ylana followed, close behind him.

Together, they moved about the perimeter's defenses, then started back towards the great ship's hatchway.

But now Ylana hesitated, and there was a brief moment of discussion. The golden hair rippled as she shook her head and gestured.

Her father's shoulders lifted in a shrug. Pivoting, he went on up the ramp without her.

Ylana turned. Almost aimlessly, she wandered out among the robots; paused and leaned back against a gigantic metal foot, watching the blue-uniformed crewmen as they toiled and sweated.

The shadows grew longer. The crewmen ceased to heed her presence.

She moved, then, swiftly, silent as the deepening dusk — sliding around the foot in one quick motion; darting past an unmanned post of the perimeter defenses to a spot out of view amid the tangled debris.

Jarl went rigid. Twisting, he worked his way along the observation plate to a place where he again could see her.

But already she was on the move again, creeping on hands and knees, farther and farther from the flagship.

Where was she going? Why had she broken out of the circle?

And what if the primitives should catch her?

The thought brought Jarl to his feet, shuddering.

Besides, with the thickening gloom down in the hold, perhaps this time he could get an answer to his questions.

With one last glance to chart the course that the girl might follow, he ran to the door and threw back the bolt; then slid out and felt his way down the black well that was the spiral stairway.

In seconds he was at the bulkhead door. Opening it a crack, he weighed his chances.

The crewmen still were busy with their tasks inside the network of defenses. The pools of shadow hung all-enshrouding. Flat on his belly, he wriggled forth and crept along the wall in the same direction he'd seen Ylana take.

Out here, once more he caught the cloying, sweetish scent of the hell-broth, mixed with smoke, and the knot in his belly tightened. The shadows loomed like grim reminders of the primitives' dark fury.

He moved faster.

BACK around the ship, a ring of blinding lights came on, as if to emphasize the death that lurked in the outer darkness. Jarl surged to his feet. Stiff with tension, he searched the gloom for some hint of Ylana.

Off to the right, close by the bulkhead, a dull sound rang, as of

some object striking metal.

Groping, Jarl found a broken brace-bar to serve him as a weapon. Wary, taut-nerved, he worked his way towards the spot from which the noise had come.

But he found nothing. Grim recognition of the hopelessness of his task crept through him.

He fought it down. Swinging round, deliberately, he kicked a crystalizing metal plate fallen from the great hull's roof.

The sound echoed, loud and startling in the silence. Jarl stood stock-still, straining his ears for some reaction.

So close at hand it made him jerk, there was a sudden rasp of movement.

Heedless now of noise, Jarl sprinted towards it. In a mighty leap, he cleared a heap of black-scorched litter.

Ylana crouched beyond it. Face a white blotch in the murk, she started up as he made the hurdle. Her mouth came open. He could hear the first whisper of a scream rising in her throat.

Savagely, he jammed his open palm across her mouth and swept her to him, smothering her kicks and blows and struggles. Lips close to her ear, he rasped, "Ylana! It's me—Jarl"

He could feel her muscles contract, her body stiffen. Then, suddenly, she was limp in his arms—clinging to him, half-sobbing.

"Quick! We've got to move!"

He dragged her with him, on along the bulkhead, then off amid the black mass of the debris.

Halting, finally, once more he strained his ears, listening for any hint that they'd been heard and followed.

But none came. At last, relaxing, he let go of her and slumped down into the drifted sand and litter.

He could feel the girl's eyes on him. But he held his silence.

"Jarl Corvett" she choked. And then, in a rush: "Thank the Gods you came, Jarl; so glad . . ."

She dropped down close beside him, her shoulder pressing against him, her hand on his.

Turning, he studied her.

The grey eyes were black-shadowed, her lovely face deep-lined.

Of a sudden he wanted nothing so much as to embrace her.

But there were so many questions to be answered

He flung them at her bluntly: "Why did they come here, Ylana—your father; Bor Legat? What brought them down to Womar—to this ship?"

He could see her soft lips quiver. For an instant the grey eyes wavered.

BUT then they raised again and met his gaze. She said: "My father is a traitor, Jarl Corvett—a traitor to himself and all the things he believes in, and to the Federation."

Jarl stared, unspeaking.

The girl's mouth worked. Her fingers gouged his hand.

Jarl — oh Jarl . . . Agony was in her voice. "Before, I told you how he'd loot Ceresta. Now—now he's gone the whole way. He dreams of still more power—of carving out an empire, destroying the Federation with its own fleet. His orders—I learned today they were to arrange a truce and spare Ceresta, give the asteroids their freedom and bring them into the Federation on even terms. But he's beyond that. All he can think of is loot and power, destruction. He's mad—mad, Jarl; stark, raving mad . . ."

The girl's voice broke. Sobbing, she buried her face against Jarl's shoulder.

Hard-jawed, tight-lipped, he held her close. But he did not dare let feeling touch him. Not now, with time so short; so much at stake.

If the asteroids could hold their freedom, even in the Federation; if Ceresta and the raider fleet were only spared

"And you—?" he clipped. "Where were you going? Why did you try to run away?"

Ylana lifted a tear-smudged face. All at once her chin was firm, and her lips no longer trembled.

She said: "Once I would have betrayed him for you alone, Jarl Corvett. This time, I came to do it for the Federation—and for freedom."

"You mean—?"

Her laugh held bitterness and pain. "The fleet commanders do not know my father's orders. I thought to reach Bor Legat's ship and warn them."

"Then Legat—"

"He came here only to bring me to my father, in hopes that he could save Ceresta. He'd channel a message through his viziscreen."

Jarl's breath came faster. There was a pricking and tingling along his spine.

He let go of Ylana; surged to his feet.

The girl rose, slim and straight beside him. "Yes, Jarl—?"

Jarl laughed, deep in his throat. Suddenly hunger and fatigue and pain were nothing. He saw only his dreams, his goal. "I'll get to Legat, Ylana! By all the gods of the void, I swear it!"

Her words came, swift and eager: "And I'll go with you—"

"No, Ylana—"

"Yes!" Fists clenched, face tight with strain again, she stepped back from him. "I've earned the right, Jarl! You can't leave me!"

For a long, long moment, he looked deep into her eyes. There were so many things to see there—courage, and anguish; fierce loyalty, determination, pain.

She hurled words at him—commanding and entreating: "You'll need me, Jarl! You can't find Legat's ship without me. It's close—it and the *Knife*. We can reach them by the time it dawns, if we

go together—"

Still Jarl stared into her eyes, unspeaking.

She broke off. Her hand came up, swept back the rippling golden hair. Her throat was a smooth-carved ivory column, her face a lovely mirror of the things that shone deep in her eyes.

SLOWLY, Jarl smiled. He knew there was no need for other answer. And words could be such futile, empty things.

Her hand in his, together they crept on through the debris; up through a broken port set high in the side of the ancient hull.

Then they were out at last, into the windswept wastes of Womar's deserts . . . stumbling on through the sand and rocks, mile after mile. They had no breath for talk, no time for resting. A pause might bring the primitives down upon them.

Jarl gripped his brace-bar club and prayed.

Then light came dimly, herald to another blazing desert day. But with it, too, rose the lance-sharp outlines of the prows of two great raider ships, ramped amid a wilderness of jutting crags.

Jarl's heart leaped. Quick jubilation surged within him. "Ylana—!"

The girl screamed.

Jarl whirled—club up, fists clenching. "What—?"

But again, there was no need for

words, for the girl was pointing back across the endless, dust-deep waste through which they'd come to an ominous moving figure.

The figure of a mighty warrior robot, a metal giant that loomed like a monstrous, man-made nightmare against the clear blue of the morning sky.

Jarl rocked—incredulous, unbelieving. His club-arm sagged down to his side.

With every fleeting second, the metal monster towered still larger, closer. Its massive legs swung out in wallowing, league-long strides, closing the gap between them.

Ylana cried out again. She darted to Jarl; clung close against him, shaking like a slim reed in a wind.

He tore free from his shell of shock and frozen-fascination. Sweeping the girl up, he raced for the nearest outcropping of jagged rock.

The giant from beyond the void stalked nearer. The clanking of the great joints rolled down on them like distant thunder.

Ylana sobbed. "My father—he must have found that I was gone—"

Jarl did not answer. Drawing her down behind the rocks, he waited, as for the Juggernaut of fate itself.

The monster thundered closer, great feet grinding stones to powder with every stride. The rising sun's rays transformed the mighty, gleaming torso to a living statue carved in orange-gold fire.

Ylana shook with a new wave of paroxysmal panic. It took every ounce of Jarl's control to hold himself from leaping up and running—tearing his heart apart in one last frantic, desperate flight.

But what good would it do to run, when this monstrous menace could overtake and pass him in a single stride?

Heart in his throat, he pulled Ylana close against him and waited in rigid, aching tension for his doom.

Another clanking step another; and the robot towered above them, mountain-high.

JARL'S straining muscles cramped with pain. In awful fascination, he felt the robot's shadow fall across them; watched as a gigantic foot came down. The very ground shook. Dust spurted in a smothering cloud.

It was as if death, personified, looked down upon them.

And then, incredibly, the ponderous leg swung out again—swept over them, past them, and crashed to earth again beyond.

Another step. The shadow lifted.

Jarl raised his head; stared, still not believing.

But the robot was still moving on—on, through the bleak crags and the wastelands.

On, towards the place where the prows of the space-ships stood out against the sky.

Straining his eyes, Jarl could see tiny figures running, the headlong

rush of panic in their stride.

But the robot was striding faster.

A roar of rockets echoed dimly. As one, the *Knife* and Bor Legat's *Lightning* blasted up into the sky.

But already the robot was leaping, pivoting, with hideous, awkward grace that spoke of awful strength beyond man's feeble understanding. Great, gleaming metal hands shot out and seized the *Lightning* in mid-air. A lance of light blazed from the force-spot in the forehead and blasted the *Knife* to shattered fragments before it cleared the rocks.

And even as the light-beam struck, the mighty arms were levering. The *Lightning's* hull-beam cracked and splintered. The body parted in a spray of shattered shards and clawing, falling crewmen.

Then it was over. With savage force, the robot hurled the broken ship to the ground, trompled the shattered hull-sections into the dust.

Ylana clung to Jarl—choking, crying, whole body shaking. Tight-lipped, holding her close, he pressed back against the rocks, so hard the ridges gouged his flesh like blunt-edged bayonets.

The metal giant was turning, now. Again its great feet clanged and thundered. Back it came once more, along the same road that had brought it to its terrible festival of carnage and destruction. Again, its shadow swept past Jarl and

Ylana, not even pausing. Slowly, the thunder of its footsteps faded. The massive hulk grew smaller, smaller, in the distance.

Then it was gone. Heavily, Jarl Corvett struggled to his feet. Slowly, grimly, he turned.

Ylana's reddened eyes met his. "Jarl—! Where are you going?"

He shrugged; made himself ignore the new panic in her voice. "You can guess that, can't you?"

"No, Jarl! No—!" Eyes wide, lips quivering and parted, she came up, clutching at his tunic.

He pushed her hands away, not daring to let the tenderness he felt show in face or action. His words came raw and harsh, in a voice he could hardly recognize as his own: "What else is there to do? The ships are gone. There's no other way that we can get in touch with Venus, fleet headquarters."

"No, Jarl "

"But your father's got a ship." He bit his words off, clipped and hard. "He's got the robots, too, it seems—may the gods of the void protect us all! But if he should die "

He let his voice trail off; stared out across the crags and desert wastes.

"Then I'll go, too—"

"No." He pushed her back again—grim, unrelenting. "A few of Bor Legat's men didn't get aboard the ship. Some may still live. Go stay with them till I come." And then, bleakly: "If I come . . ."

Turning without a backward glance, he plodded off through the scorching sand, following the course of the giant robot—

The course to *rey* Gundre and his flagship.

CHAPTER X

WOMAR'S blazing day—barely half as long as that of Earth—had waned again before Jarl reached his destination.

Then, at last, he was crawling through the dusk on hands and knees, up to the shattered hull of the ship from beyond the void. The sun had burned his face to a tortured mask, and his feet were raw, leaden lumps of flesh that left a trail of blood behind him.

Breathing hard, staggering weak from hunger and fatigue, he dragged himself up out of the dirt to the broken port. He did not even wonder what he would find within. He didn't care. He only knew that whatever he was to do, he must do quickly, before the last remnants of his draining strength were spent and he fell, to rise no more.

And what was he to do?

Drunkenly, he laughed. Who was he to say? His world was a blur of star-splotched black, and sometimes—too often—he saw stars that he knew weren't there. The time was past for schemes and planning.

At best, below, he'd die tonight.

But perhaps he might take *rey*

Gundre with him.

rey Gundre, Ylana's father.

Her father—! No wonder her golden loveliness was shadowed. The real wonder was that madness hadn't claimed her.

But at least, this way, her sire's death would not be on her conscience. No one could claim that hers had been the hand to slay him.

DOWN in the hold, the Forspark lights were blazing. With a tremendous effort, Jarl pulled himself through the port. Half-sliding, half-falling, he skidded down into the dirt and debris; lay there for a moment, resting, dizzy and straining for breath to fill his lungs.

Then, lurching to his feet, he stared across at the ring of light; the flagship, ramped amid the forest of towering robots.

What turned a man like *rey* Gundre from the call of duty? Where did it start, that insatiate lust for power and booty?

And how, so quickly, had the high commissioner learned the secret of controlling the metal giants?

Had *Ktar* Wassreck talked before he died? Could he have sought to buy his life, at the last, with this final, priceless treasure?

But now, to think took too much effort. Now—Jarl swayed—he only knew that he must kill that such power as this was too great to be trusted to any man, be he of the Federation or the raiders.

Yet how to reach him, there in

the ship, while armed crewmen paced to and fro in the ring of light, on guard against the primitives?

The primitives

Jarl leaned against the hull, and laughed his drunken laugh again.

The primitives: they held the answer.

Shuffling and stumbling, he worked his way through the piles of debris to the charred ruins of the altar platform. On hands and knees, he searched the trod sand, probing amid the stinking litter.

Then, at last, his fingers touched the scorched, stiff corpse of a dead primitive, still sprawled in the dirt where the creature had fallen. Fumbling, he stripped off his own garments; replaced them with the corpse's shoulder-plumes and girdle, ankle-and wrist-bands, sandals. Unclamping the hideous metal mask, he clamped it on his own head. He smeared his body thick with sand and ashes.

Then it was done and he was ready, save for a weapon.

A weapon He frowned. What weapon was there that he could carry past the guards who paced their posts about *rey* Gundre's ship?

Wearily, he sagged back on his haunches and let sand trickle through his fingers while he tried to prod his aching brain to action.

The grit piled up in a little heap between his knees, a dusty cone symbolic of this whole thrice-cursed desert world of Womar. It was everywhere, that grit and dust, under-

foot and in the air alike. It rasped and smothered, choked and blinded.

And—it came to him in a sudden flash—it was the weapon he was seeking!

Scooping up the sand, he stuffed it between the girdle and his belly in sifting handfuls, till he could pack in no more.

And as he did so, his weariness fell away a little. A tiny spark of his old fire came alive again. A thread of the strength he'd thought was gone flowed slowly through him.

He found that he could even stand straight without staggering.

Bleakly, he laughed.

Then, breathing deep, throwing back his head, he howled the wild, harsh howl the charging primitives had uttered—pushed it out with all the volume he could muster.

He could see the guards jerk, in the light-ring round the ship. A ray-gun blazed.

JARL crouched behind a pile of debris. After a moment, when the guards' first excitement had subsided, he moved in closer; howled again.

This time, the crewmen showed less tension. Grim, purposeful, they crouched by their weapons, watching and waiting.

Jarl moved still closer. He shouted—a guttural, clacking diatribe that went on for half a minute.

Two officers came to the nearest point of the defense perimeter. Un-

certainly, they peered out into the echoing sea of darkness.

Again Jarl shouted; kept up the stream of clacking sound still longer.

One of the officers stepped back; gestured. A Forspark light swung round and focussed on the area where Jarl lay hidden.

Jarl scraped his palms against his legs. Drum-like, his heart pounded. His belly writhed as he weighed the odds against this madman's gamble.

But there was no other way.

Once more he shouted; kept the clatter running.

And as he did so—slowly; open hands upthrust and empty—he rose to full height. Still shouting, he moved step by step into the beam of searching light.

He was close to the perimeter, now—close enough to hear the guards' excited babble.

Still no shot came; no ray-beam lanced out to burn him down.

Boldly, he strode forward, straight towards the defenses.

Crewmen moved up to meet him—cold-eyed, weapons leveled.

He reached the edge of the perimeter; stood there, waiting.

A *Fantay* officer came out. Ray-gun in hand, throat-sac aquiver, he circled Jarl, uncertainty and puzzlement written on his ugly face.

Jarl threw out more of the meaningless, clacking syllables. The mask distorted them even further. They came out ■ guttural rattle

like nothing ever heard on any planet.

A *Pervod* said, "Better take him in to the commissioner. Maybe the vocodor can make something of his gabble."

The *Fantay* nodded briefly. His pad-like hands moved over Jarl, probing the plumes, the wrist-bands, the girdle.

A trickle of sand spilled to the ground.

The *Fantay* brushed it off, unheeding. He reached up; started to fumble at the catches of the metal mask.

Jarl's heart leaped. He knocked away the officer's hand and hurled an angry cascade of gutturals at the creature.

The *Fantay* fell back a step, startled and even more uncertain; and an Earthman clipped, "Leave that tin hat alone, Beyno! This thing's a primitive. Maybe he thinks it's bad luck or something to take off his mask in front of strangers."

"Yes; that could be it." The officer swung around. "Gundre will be up in the control section. Let's take this *chitza* there."

TAKING Jarl's arm, he led him forward, centered amid the little knot of crewmen. Across the spreading ring of light they moved, and up the ramp into *rey* Gundre's mighty flagship through echoing corridors in and out of a lift that whisked them a dozen lev-

els higher in as many seconds . . . down still another gleaming metal passage, till at last they faced the door of the craft's control section.

The officer let go of Jarl and stepped forward; touched the signal button.

The intercom plate glowed. *rey* Gundre's voice blared: "Yes! What is it?" He sounded tense and angry.

The *Fantay* clipped, "Sir, we've got one of the primitives. He came in of his own free will, but we can't understand what he's trying to say. We thought maybe you'd want to put him on the vocodor."

"A primitive—!" There was a moment's hesitation. Then: "All right. Just a minute."

The intercom plate went blank.

Jarl's knees were suddenly weak again. He swayed a little. Already, so soon, he was here. It had been incredibly simple.

But the next step—

Abruptly, the door to the control section opened part way. The high commissioner himself looked out. His lean, handsome face was haggard, the dark hair so rumpled that the white blaze was almost lost.

His deep-set eyes flicked to Jarl Corvett. Then he snapped, "Two guards will be enough," and drew back a fraction to let them enter.

They filed in—first the *Fantay* officer, then Jarl. The guards brought up the rear.

Behind them, *rey* Gundre closed and locked the door.

It was a bare, bleak room—the navigation unit, with its globes and astrocharts and viziscreens. Through a half-open door to the right, Jarl could see the switches and dial-studded panels of the operating cubicle; the empty pilot-chair.

Tight-drawn as a *llorin's* bow-string, he shifted, seeking the spot best suited to his purpose. Wry, mocking words *Ktar* Wassreck once had spoken rang in his brain: "*You'll live longer if you pick place to run to before you have to run.*"

Even now, as he faced certain death, it was good advice. Disregarding the others, he moved almost to the cubicle's doorway.

For the first time, then, as he swung round to face his captors, he saw the plate of the long-range viziscreen.

Saw it rocked almost
cried out.

For there, in stark detail, were the familiar outlines of tiny Ceres: the bare expanse that was Ceresta's sprawling port the geometric patterns of the town.

And there, too, in the upper scanner, shone clusters of tiny, crawling pinpoints—the mighty Federation fleet hurtling through the void, poising in this moment to lance down upon their distant prey.

IT dragged through a thousand years, that awful instant; an instant so terrible that it made the navigation room swim and dissolve

before Jarl Corvett's eyes.

'Why had his fate brought him here at this final moment? Why must he take his stand just in time to see the Federation fleet blast his one last dream?

Desperately, fists clenched and sweating, he tried to calculate how long it would take the racing ships to reach a range where they could use Wassreck's deadly force projectors. Five minutes—? Three?

But what did it matter? Whatever the time, it still would be too short.

Unless fate had brought him here now for a purpose; unless the gods of the void themselves were riding at his side

His stomach writhed. With a will born of utter frenzy, he tore his eyes from the screen.

The guards and the *Fantay* officer still stood waiting. *rey* Gundre was studying him with narrowed eyes.

Cold as death, Jarl made himself stride forward. Thrusting stiff hands between the girdle and his belly, once again he spat a stream of crackling gutturals at his foes.

But then, the high commissioner was suddenly tensing. backing. "What is this?" he cried sharply. "You're no primitive!" His voice went high and raw. "Guards! Seize him—!"

The *Fantay* lunged. The guards clawed for their ray-guns.

But already Jarl was pivoting, whipping a fistful of sand into the

officer's eyes. He leaped back as he threw it, so that one guard was between him and the other. Savagely, he hammered home a blow; crowded close and caught the ray-gun's barrel as it cleared the holster, levering it up till it tore free from the creature's tortured grasp.

Then the other guard was upon him, smashing him to his knees.

But the metal mask broke the force of the blow. Jarl triggered the ray-gun. The beam lanced out, struck home at the base of the bulging jaw.

The guard fell backward.

Jarl fired again. The *Fantay* died.

But now *rey* Gundre's own weapon was out. The remaining guard came charging in.

Jarl dropped flat as the high commissioner fired. The beam passed over him; blasted the lunging guard.

Jarl shot for *rey* Gundre's weapon.

The ray-gun flew out of the high commissioner's hand.

Panting, Jarl lurched to his feet. His whole body trembled. For an instant he thought he was going to faint.

Then, out of the depths of his will, new strength came. He leveled the ray gun; held it steady.

rey Gundre went white to the lips. Unsteadily, he moved backward, till his body, the palms of his hands, were pressed flat against the wall. He could not seem to tear

his eyes from the hideous metal mask Jarl wore.

"Is the high commissioner afraid, then—?" Jarl laughed harshly. "Forget it, Gundre, I've things for you to do before you die."

"Jarl Corvett—!" The commissioner's eyes went wide with shock, mirror-bright with fear.

Jarl laughed again, a bleak and mirthless sound. With his free hand, he unclamped the mask; dropped it to the floor.

Tightly, he said: "Get a cross on your fleet, Commissioner. Give them their true orders—that Ceres is to be spared."

THE panic that flared in *rey* Gundre's eyes was a frightful thing to see. His face sagged, grey as lead. "No, Corvett—! Not that! I can't—!"

"Then you can die," Jarl said.

He raised the ray-gun.

The high commissioner's mouth worked. "No, no . . ." Tottering, he stumbled towards the viziscreen.

Jarl followed him, grim as death.

The clustered pinpoints were closer to Ceres now, slashing through the void like streaks of light.

With trembling fingers, *rey* Gundre fumbled at the dials.

"Faster!" Jarl clipped. "Your life depends on it, Gundre! If they strike, you die!"

A new voice, behind them, said, "No, Jarl."

By sheer reflex, Jarl whirled.

A man stood in operation unit's doorway . . . a tall man with a gaunt, pain-twisted body, and high-domed head, and burning eyes.

A man Jarl Corvett knew so well—

"*Wassreck—!*"

"Yes, Jarl. *Wassreck.*" The other's voice was almost gentle. The wry mouth twisted with the thin ghost of a smile.

Jarl's knees went weak as water. His gun-hand sagged. He clutched a chair to keep from falling.

Still smiling, *Ktar* *Wassreck* moved forward, into the navigation room. "Did I surprise you, Jarl?"

"I—thought you dead."

"And Sais, too—?" The other chuckled softly, and half-turned. "Come, my dear . . ."

And of a sudden, there was dark Sais, framed in the open doorway—radiant, lips half-parted, eyes aglow.

Ktar *Wassreck* said, "I know how much she means to you, my comrade. I brought her here, from Karrel's ship, to wait till you should come." His pain-warped shoulders twisted. "Because I knew you'd come, Jarl, sometime. Loyalty is a thing you understand."

"I called him on the *Knife's* screen, Jarl," Sais broke in. Her voice was warm and eager. "The crew didn't think to guard me. After that, I ran away, into the desert, and waited till the flagship came."

Jarl swayed. His brain was reel-

ing, and everything had a queer, distorted look. He wondered if perhaps he'd finally fainted . . . if this were all a dream, somehow, or death.

But he made himself speak, because he had to learn the truth . . . find answers to the questions that kept tumbling and jumbling

"You . . . were aboard the flagship—?"

"Of course, Jarl," Wassreck nodded. "I wasn't captured, nor yet did I surrender. All this has been a careful plan, worked out between the high commissioner and me."

"A—plan—?"

"Yes!" *Ktar* Wassreck's voice rang. With sudden eagerness, he leaned forward, and his eyes burned with a strange new light. "Jarl, with the power that's in these robots, the universe is ours to rule! What force is there that can stand against them? What planet could defy their might?"

"But the high commissioner . . . " Jarl gestured, stumbled. "Why would he aid the outlaw worlds—?" And then, in sudden panic, whirling: "Quick—! The Federation fleet—it's headed down for Ceres! We've got to stop them! It may already be too late!"

But Wassreck's voice said, "No, Jarl."

It was flat this time, no longer gentle.

SLOWLY, slowly Jarl turned from the scanner, with its clus-

tered, crawling pinpoints. A seeping emptiness was rising in him—an ugly, hollow feeling he'd never felt before.

Wassreck still stood in the same spot as before. But now, his right hand was at waist-level.

It held a blaster.

In a voice not even remotely resembling his own, Jarl asked, "What do you mean?"

Wassreck's eyes were burning coals. His gaunt face seemed even thinner than before.

He said: "I mean the outlaw worlds must die!"

Jarl nodded slowly. "I guessed that would be it."

"Don't you see, Jarl—?" Sais cried, coming to him. "The raiders will never lose their idiot dreams of freedom! Always, everywhere, they'll make trouble! It would be madness to leave them with Ceresta and their fleet. The Federation planets know what it means to bow before a ruler—"

Wordless, Jarl looked down at her.

Hand on his arm, she rushed on—glowing, eager: "At first my father thought of you as dangerous. But always, I've loved you: That's why I came to you on Ceres, saying he was captured—so that you would prove your loyalty to him. Now, he knows; and the two of you can rule together. You and I—we'll have each other "

She pressed against Jarl—body warm, hair soft and fragrant.

Wassreck broke in: "Jarl, you saw what happened today when I tried out that robot on Bor Legat's ships! And once the raider fleet is smashed, there'll be no opposition.

The numb emptiness filled Jarl to overflowing. "And if I say no —?"

He could see the other stiffen.

"Is there a choice?" Wassreck's laugh was suddenly savage. "Your ray-gun's down, and my blaster's on you. Even if you could kill me, the crew knows you're here; they'd be waiting for you."

And Sais whispered, "Jarl, why should you die for nothing? What can it gain you, or anyone else?" Her cool fingers caressed him. "Jarl, don't you understand? I love you! I want us to be together, now and forever."

Jarl stood very still.

HOW many nights had he lain in a chill, lonely bunk far out in space, and dreamed of Sais beside him? How many times had he cursed the raider way, the blood and iron, and longed instead for power and booty?

Now he could have those things. What made him hang back? Why did he hesitate?

Why indeed, when refusal meant death without gain, without meaning?

Only then he thought of other things, and pain came in a rush to fill the emptiness.

For he thought of those who lived, and those who'd died, whether they lived or died for good or evil. Of Bor Legat and Ungo, Tas Karrel and Ylana, a thousand fallen crewmen.

Of Ceresta's teeming hives, and Pallas, and of the raider fleet.

Of freedom.

Perhaps there was still a place in this mad universe for a man who did not fear to die.

Again, he looked down into Sais' dark, lovely face. Again, her hair's fragrance rose like perfume in his nostrils.

But as he stared, somehow, the lines and contours kept shifting, changing, till it was as if he were gazing at one of the primitives' hideous, leering masks.

Bleakly, he pushed her away.

Her face sagged, incredulous. But it was *Ktar* Wassreck himself who spoke: "You know what this means, Jarl—?"

"I know."

"Then it doesn't count that I came for you on Horla? Loyalty means nothing —?"

"Loyalty—?" Jarl laughed a bitter laugh. "And what are you loyal to, then, Wassreck? Your friends who'll die down on Ceresta?"

The gaunt man's face grew cold and bleak. He did not answer.

Jarl turned his head; slashed out at *rey* Gundre, still standing by the viziscreen: "You, Commissioner! What are you loyal to? The Federation, that you betray? Ylana, your

own daughter, who'd rather die in the desert than live here with you?"

A trace of color came to the high commissioner's grey, sagging face. Unspeaking, he looked away.

"Loyalty—!" Jarl spat. "How can any of you even pretend to know what it means? Because a man's first loyalty is to his own conscience—and conscience is a thing you neither have nor understand!"

Wassreck's gaunt face contorted. "A pretty speech—to die with."

His finger went white on the blaster's trigger.

Jarl Corvett whipped up his ray-gun.

YET even in that moment, Jarl knew the truth: that his strength had gone; that he was too slow. Before he could even fire himself, Wassreck would kill him.

But he didn't dare to die—not while *Ktar* Wassreck still lived and held the secret of the mighty warrior robots. Too much was at stake. Too many could suffer.

Only now, there was nothing he could do. At last, the gods of the void had ridden on their way without him.

But then, incredibly, another figure hurtled across his field of vision.

The figure of High Commissioner *rey* Gundre.

For a split second, Wassreck's eyes wavered.

Jarl dived to one side as the blaster roared. The bolt seared ■ flam-

ing path diagonally along his ribs.

But now, Jarl, too, was firing—lancing a ray-beam into Wassreck's midriff.

The gaunt body stiffened straightened fell.

Jarl threw himself round, searching for Sais and *rey* Gundre.

They lay in a tumbled heap near the farthest wall. The commissioner was twitching, moaning faintly.

Jarl stumbled across to where he lay, tried to help him to turn over.

A blaster bolt had taken the man high in the chest. Blood already was trickling from his mouth. "Ylana—!" he gasped, then choked on the blood.

A moment later, he died.

Jarl turned to Sais.

She, too, was dead. She held a blaster in her hand—and her neck was broken.

Dully, head throbbing, Jarl remembered *rey* Gundre's mad, unexplained rush.

Now it needed no explanation.

Outside, someone was pounding on the door. Dim sounds of tumult sifted through the portal.

So the guards had come already

Struggling to his feet again, Jarl made his way to the viziscreen. He had lost all track of time. He half expected to find Ceres already blasted, broken.

It still was there. But the clustered pinpoints that were the Federation fleet had begun converging high above, readying for the final

plunge.

With trembling fingers, Jarl set a cross for the lead ship; switched on the communicator unit. Harshly, in *rey* Gundre's name, he rasped out orders.

The wheeling ships veered; peeled off on a different course.

Ceres was saved.

Jarl sagged against the screen. He felt incredibly old, incredibly weary.

The pounding on the door grew louder.

Jarl thought: *Another minute and they'll break in . . .*

And he would die.

ONLY all at once, he didn't care. His job was done. What difference did it make, what happened now?

His only regret was that Ylana would never know that at the last, when the crisis came, her father had broken clean and died to save him.

And Sais . . . What things had been in her mind when she raised that blaster to try to kill the man she claimed to love?

It was strange, though: he felt no hatred towards her.

But, neither did he feel love, or sorrow, or pity. It was as if she were an utter stranger, some passer-by he'd never known.

So different from Ylana

Ylana the golden. He spoke her name aloud, and liked its sound.

Ylana the golden. Red lips, grey eyes, and rippling hair.

Such queer things to be thinking about at a time like this. But then, his whole state of mind just now was somewhat queer.

Out in the hall, some heavy object smashed against the door. Soon, he knew the panel would crash down.

Why wait for it? Why not go out and meet death as a raider should?

Jarl laughed drunkenly. Reeling, he stumbled to the door; with a clumsy jerk threw back the bolt and braced himself to take the blasts.

Then the door burst open. Beings of half-a-dozen planets charged in upon him—and Big Ungo of Jupiter was in their van.

Jarl knew then that this was a nightmare—the delirium of a fevered, over-weary brain. He closed his eyes and let himself go limp; slumped to the floor.

But when he looked up again, Ungo was still there, and now Ylana, too, knelt beside him, whispering, "Jarl—! Jarl Corvett . . ." while the red lips quivered and tears spilled from the cool grey eyes.

Ungo said: "She made us come, Jarl—all of us that were left from Bor Legat's ships. With her to talk for us, we didn't even have to fight to get in here."

"You're lying!" Jarl accused him, twisting as pain stabbed along his wounded side. "You're not here. I'm just dreaming. When I wake up, if I'm not dead, you'll all be gone."

"No, Jarl. This isn't dreaming. This is real." All at once Ylana was smiling through her tears. "Sleep, now, Jarl. I'll still be here when you waken—or forever, if you want me."

As she spoke, she reached out

and gently closed his eyes.

He didn't mind. As a matter of fact, of a sudden he wanted to let sleep come, and quickly.

For now he knew that waking would be better than any dream.

The End

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *Harold W. McCauley* ★

— THIS MONTH'S COVER ARTIST —

(Concluded from Page 2)

Pepsi Cola, Orange Kist, Schlitz, and many calendar firms. But I enjoy doing science fiction illustrating more than anything else because I love the literature. I read most of the magazines in the field and I must say that I consider Madge right at the top—and not because my work appears there!

Aside from the professional aspects of my life I'm kept pretty busy at home training my German Shepherd dog, Alko,—and my wife, Grace. So far Alko seems to be responding better, bringing me my slippers in the evening. But lest marital mayhem ensue the moment my wife reads this let me say that Grace is much prettier!

Seriously, my friends used to kid me about using beautiful models in my work, asking me why I didn't up and marry one. Last year I did just that. Grace is not only a beautiful

model and the nicest wife I have, but she sports Royal blood having been Queen of the 1951 Automobile Show. I was hooked the moment I saw her posing beside a new Crosley at exposition. After meeting her and working with her I knew she was the girl for me. (What decided her that I was the guy I don't know. I suppose a man never does—he just considers himself lucky!)

The old saw about two living as cheaply as one is usually good for a laugh, but in our case it actually makes us money—who needs to hire models when he's married to one? (Grace posed, for example, for the July IMAGINATION cover.)

Which about brings me up to date, except to say that I hope you liked my cover on this issue of Madge half as well as I enjoyed painting it.

—*Harold W. McCauley*

IT KUD HABBEN TU YU!

By
Damon Knight

After breakfast Henry suddenly found the city overrun by an alien horde. Strangely, nobody seemed afraid of the Kreeth. Nobody—but Henry . . .



HENRY Durant groaned and put his newspaper down on the counter. He had read halfway through the movie column all right before the stuff suddenly turned to gibberish. His head felt as if somebody had been making a rock garden in it.

"More coffee?" said the red-headed counter girl.

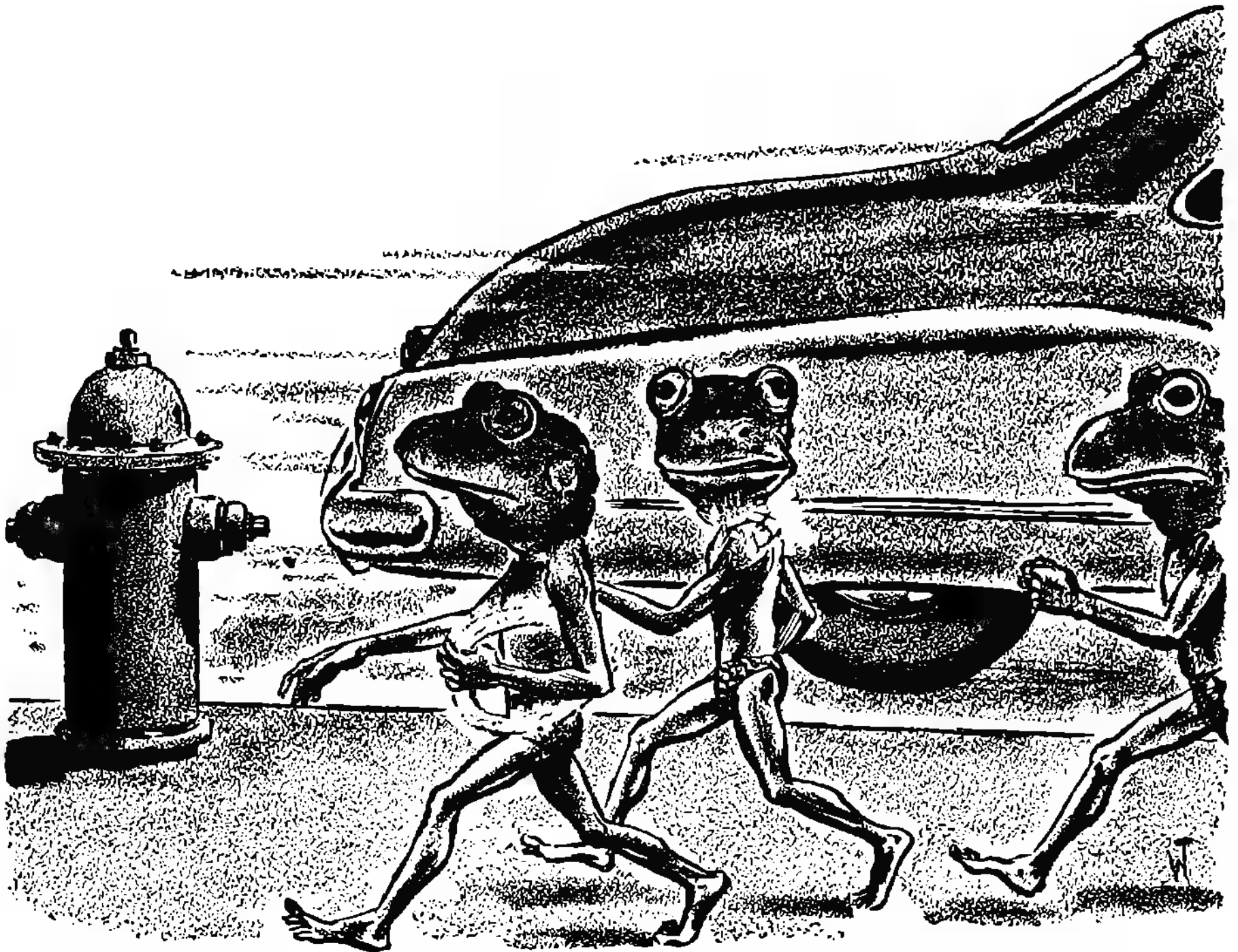
Henry looked dazedly at the cup, half full of coffee that had got as cold as it was going to. The bacon and eggs on his plate had also done their best; they had a congealed final look. "No thanks, Marion. Gimme the check, will you?"

"Sure." She dropped the bill by

his plate, watching as Henry got up, dredging for change in his trousers pocket. "Got a head this morning?" she asked.

"I got something," Henry said expressively, and wandered over to the cashier.

Outside, he hunched his wide shoulders against the chills that were climbing up his back, and blinked reproachfully at the summer morning. People were hurrying crisply by; the sun was bright on the clean pavements; oranges and apples glowed from the shade of the awning across the street. It was the kind of morning that ordinarily made Henry's feet itch for tennis



sneakers. Now he felt that a hot water bottle would be more appropriate.

Maybe he was really sick, he thought. He'd never been sick in his life—if you don't count measles and mumps—but ■ few highballs the night before had never made him feel this way, either.

He looked at the big clock in front of the bank. Eight fifty-eight. Henry fetched up a deep sigh and moved off down the street.

People's feet marched along ahead of him. A pair of slim ones in high-heeled pumps twinkled by in the other direction, but Henry was too dispirited to look up. They were followed immediately by two large, naked feet, a dark purple in color.

Henry stopped where he was, raised his head and swiveled slowly. Somebody bumped into him. Henry said, "Sorry," and kept staring into the crowd, where a broad purple back had just vanished.

He discovered that he was sweating, for no reason that he could figure out. An irritating sentence was running through his head: *Are there purple people? Are there purple people? Are there—*

HE turned and started walking again. There were a hundred and fifty million people in the United States, he told himself. One of them might easily be purple, or even two. How would he know? He'd never been farther than a couple of

hundred miles from Cartersburg.

But suppose there was a purple person, why would he walk around in nothing but ■ loincloth? And those feet—Henry closed his eyes for an instant and saw them clearly. The toes were as long as Henry's fingers, and they had webs between them.

"Somebody advertising something," Henry said aloud. He didn't believe it for a minute.

He reached the curb just as the light changed. While he waited, a small purple man in a white loincloth came walking by. He had a head like a frog's, a huge belly and long spindly arms and legs. His hands and feet were webbed. He went striding along with his enormous eyes fixed straight ahead, ignoring the traffic a few inches to his right. Under his arm he carried what looked like a big magnet made of green glass.

Henry watched him out of sight. Then he pointed. "Did you see that?" he asked the man on his left.

The man had a stiff Panama hat and a stiff white collar, with a stiff face in between. "What?" he demanded.

Henry gulped. Another purple man was following in the wake of the first. This one had a tape measure draped around his sloping shoulders, and was carrying a silver hoop that had short pieces of red and blue ribbon tied onto it.

"There's another one," said Hen-

ry. "Do you see it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the stiff man testily. The light changed and he walked away from Henry.

Henry stood there for a minute, then walked over to the railing and sat down. The hands of the bank clock pointed to 9:03. Ten minutes later he was thirteen minutes late for work, and he had seen eight more purple men. One had been running, with a large dull-silver egg clutched to his breast. The rest had been walking, with an absorbed, businesslike air, some carrying an assortment of unfamiliar objects, some without.

Nobody except Henry had paid any attention to them. But nobody had bumped into them, either.

Henry realized that the problem admitted of only two main solutions: either everybody else was crazy, or he was.

THE trouble was, he had to know, but he wasn't sure he wanted to find out. He got up off the railing after a while and walked slowly down the street.

In front of Barney's Bar and Grill a lounge was standing, a big man with a vacant red face and pale eyes. Directly across the street from him was a purple man, sitting in the doorway of a shop. Henry had been passing this way every day for six years, and that store had always been vacant. There was a sign over it, now, brightly

lettered in something that looked like a cross between Gregg shorthand and Arabic.

Henry stopped irresolutely in front of the lounge, who looked at him without expression. The juke box was playing inside, and Henry could hear a low rumble of conversation, punctuated by laughter.

"Look," said Henry, "will you do me a favor?"

The man took a toothpick from his mouth, looked at it reflectively, and put it back. "Whatcha want?" he asked.

Henry glanced across the street. "You see that store between the yarn shop and the delicatessen?"

The lounge said cautiously, "Yeah."

"Well," said Henry, "you see anything funny about it?"

The big man looked. "Nah."

Henry shuddered, and abandoned discretion. "Look," he said, pointing wildly, "you mean you don't see anything sitting in the doorway, right—over—there?"

"Sure," said the man, looking surprised. "A kreeth."

Henry bent forward. "A what?" he said carefully.

"A kreeth, bud, a kreeth. What's a madder witchoo?" The big man slowly straightened and took his hands out of his pockets. "You're nuts. Go on beat it before I boff you one."

"Wait a minute," said Henry desperately. He hauled out his wallet. "Here's a buck. All I want you to

do is tell me everything you know about kreeths. Okay?"

The big man took the dollar and shoved it into his jeans. "Kreeth is kreeth," he said. "You can see, canchoo? They're purple. They look kinda like frogs. That's all."

"What do they do?"

"How'n hell should I know?"

"Well—where did they come from?"

"Listen," said the big man, bunching his fists and leaning closer. "If you wanta know all that stuff, why'nchoo go to the liberry? Who ast you to come around here botherin' me?" He took a deep breath. "You're nuts! You're crazy inna head! Go on, beat it or I'll boff you!"

HENRY went away, with his head whirling. The library was only a block away from his rooming house. He went there, nodded to the librarian, and ran a shaking finger down the line of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, looking for the KR's. The volume he wanted was number 13.

There it was, on page 499, right after "Kraken":

KREETH, an order (sudorana sabienz) of intelligent, ovibaros, bibedal mammalz klosely rezcmblig both frogz and men, tho not allied tu either. They are not, in fagt, reladed tu any other Terrestrial animal and it iz believed that they came originly from another blanet. This belief iz subborted by the fagt

that the kreeth's kolture, as shown thruout their three thouzand yearz of rekorded assosiashen with homo sabienz, iz inkapable of minglig with ourz, tho the kreeth have alwayz kooberrated with men when not greeted by hostility

Henry read this in growing bewilderment. It sounded as if it had been written by someone with a bad cold. He closed the book over his finger and looked at the spine, and then the title page. Could the whole thing possibly be an elaborate gag?

Both spine and title page read: *Enzyclohedea Brittanika.*

Henry set the book down carefully and went over to the newspaper rack. He picked up the paper he had been reading at breakfast this morning. One glance was enough: it was written in the same-fouled-up English as the "enzyklo-bedia."

He forced himself to go back to the encyclopaedia and read the article through to the end. It was two pages long: it traced the kreeth's history from the time of the first kings in Egypt to the present (the kreeth, it said, had been venerated as gods by the early Egyptians). It mentioned the achievements of the kreeth in science, art and literature, all of which seemed to be superior to mankind's. It referred to the influence of the kreeth language on ancient and modern tongues. And it kept on emphasizing the kreeth's peaceful, benevolent nature.

To the best of Henry's knowledge, not a word of it was true. Because there never had been any kreeth, not until this morning.

He found himself sitting out on the stone steps of the library, staring vacantly at a squirrel who was staring back at him. "No peanuts," said Henry. "Go away." He remembered something his high school physics teacher had said when Henry had broached the subject of H. G. Wells and Martian invasions generally. What was it, again?

"If we ever are invaded from outer space, my guess is that we'll never know it happened."

Why? "Because," said the teacher, "if you're going to assume a civilization able to travel across space and attack another planet, you might just as well go all the way and assume that they can wipe us out before we even know they're here."

Henry had recoiled from this—being a strong advocate of disintegrator rays—as prosaic, but it seemed grimly applicable now. Last night, no kreeth. This morning, they were here—and everybody but Henry was thoroughly convinced that they had *always* been here. It was neater than wiping everybody out, and it had been perfectly done. All the records had been changed to fit, even the newspapers had been altered: and probably everybody in the world wrote "b" instead of "p" now, and believed he had always done so.

There was only one flaw: for reasons unknown, it hadn't worked on Henry.

HIS heart was pounding, and the palms of his hands were moist. He got up and started walking rapidly downtown. One thing was certain—the sheep that wouldn't stay with the herd couldn't look forward to a long, happy life. He had to get back into his normal routine as fast as he could, and stay in it, and never give any slightest sign that he knew too much.

He couldn't ask any more direct questions; that would be suicide. He'd have to watch, and wait, and find out as much as he could without giving himself away. Maybe there were others who had escaped having their minds tampered with—eventually, he could find them, and together they could work out something. A kreeth went by. Henry started nervously, and looked the other way.

A girl's voice called, "Hi, Henry!"

He turned. "Oh, hello, kreeth—I mean hello, Kathy."

She laughed. "That's a funny mistake. You just going in to work, Henry?"

"Yeah—hung over a little bit this morning. But I feel all right now."

"Uh-huh. Well, take it easy." She swung off across the street, her blonde hair shining in the sun. Sweating, Henry walked rigidly on. At the corner, he couldn't resist

turning.

She was standing in the doorway of the stationery, watching him soberly. Then she smiled and waved.

A bad break, he told himself. Mustn't make any more — don't show any interest in the kreeth, ignore them the way everybody else does.

His boss was behind the counter, selling somebody a tennis racket. When the customer left, Henry went over and said, "I'm sorry, kreeth, I was hung over this morning—" His breath caught. "I mean Keith," he said, and sobs welled up in his throat. "I mean Keith, I mean Keith!" he wailed, and then he was on the floor, clutching at his boss's knees, and he heard his own voice going right on, babbling, pleading, begging for mercy. He tried to stop, but he couldn't. It went right on, and he *tried*, he *tried*, but he *couldn't stop it*.

Then his boss was leading him into the back room and he was crying. Then, after a long time, somebody came in and said, "Do you remember me, Henry?"

He looked. The face was blurred, but he recognized it. "You're Dr. Phelps," he said. "The psychiatrist."

"That's right. I met you at your father's place, last summer. Well, Henry, do you think you can tell me what the trouble is?"

How much had he given away? He had to tell some of the truth, anyhow; maybe he could get away with it. "It's the kreeth," he said,

and heard his voice breaking in spite of himself. "They scare me."

"Why?"

"—I don't know. They just do. I can't explain it. Just all of a sudden, they do."

The doctor leaned closer. "Listen, Henry," he said in a lower tone, "please trust me. You never heard of the kreeth until this morning, did you?"

Henry stared at him. "No," he whispered. "Then you know, too?"

"I'm going to try to help you. Tell me everything you did today—when you found out, what you did about it."

Henry told him.

WHEN he was finished, the doctor said, "Henry, you're upset but I know you're intelligent. So I'm going to try to talk this out with you now. There are certain things you've got to understand, and it will be much healthier for you if you can grasp them now. First, you know that the kreeth are immensely more intelligent than we are. don't you?"

"That's what they want us to think—"

"But it must be true, mustn't it?"

"I guess so," Henry mumbled. "Yes."

"All right—the next thing is, did you ever hear of Occam's Razor?"

"No. What's that got to do—"

"Wait. Listen. Occam's Razor is the name of a test for all kinds of theories. It's very simple. It's

just that when two or more explanations fit all the facts, the chances are that the simplest one is right. Does that make sense?"

"I guess."

"Okay. Now here's one explanation of the painful events you've just gone through. We were invaded this morning by those frogmen, who hypnotized every last soul on Earth—except you—and not only that, changed every written word on the planet to support the idea that they've been here for thousands of years. And here's another solution—"

He talked on, and Henry listened with horror. "No!" he shouted finally, "you can't fool me! You're just as bad as the rest of them—"

A policeman opened the door and looked in; there was another man behind him.

"All right," said Dr. Phelps.

They dragged Henry out, kicking and screaming.

"Lord, I hate to see a thing like that happen," said Keith Morgan. "A nice kid. One of the best."

"It happens to the best, sometimes," said the doctor. "The most sensitive, anyhow. That's what we get for living on the same planet with a race that are gods compared to us. We've got a racial inferior-

ity complex. The ego won't stand it—breaks down, tries to pretend that it never heard of the kreeth before. Sometimes there's a complete occlusion—the victim simply doesn't see the kreeth or hear them or know anything about them. Other times, he makes up a fantasy to explain the fact that he can't remember anything about them. That's commoner, oddly enough."

He sighed, and listened to the ambulance siren howling away into silence. The flaw in Henry's fantasy—if only he could have been made to see it—was that the change, the invasion, would have had to happen in a gnat's-wink of time. Just before Henry finished breakfast, to be precise—when the newspaper he was reading "suddenly turned to gibberish."

The resemblances of modern English to the kreeth's spoken tongue had to be part of the rejected pattern; they were too obvious. That was why, when Henry's mind broke, he suddenly found he couldn't go on reading his paper, though he told himself it was because of a hangover. And the same thing, the doctor thought, could happen to anybody. As a matter of fact—

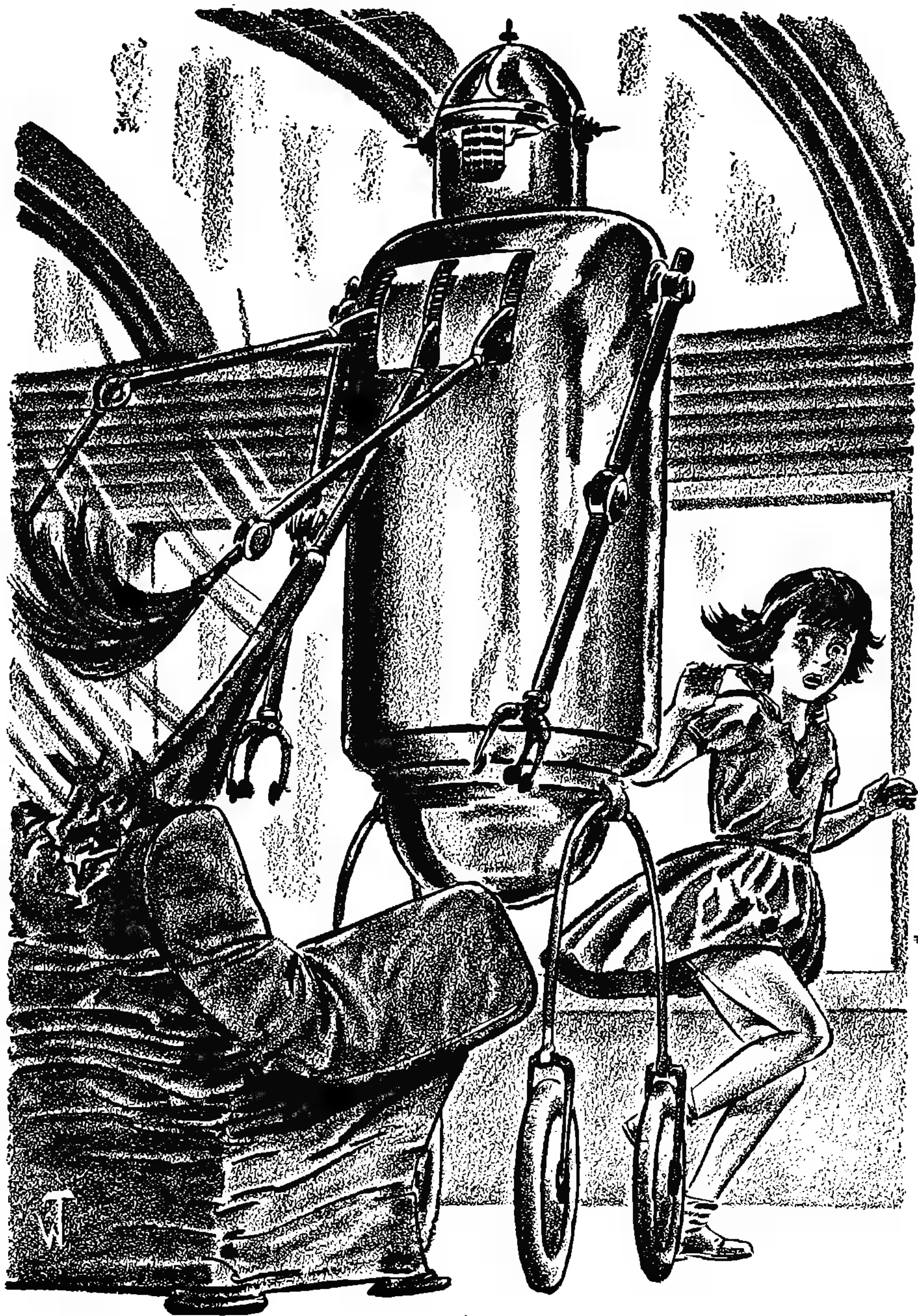
It kud habben tu yu.

WATCH FOR:—

THE TOY by KRIS NEVILLE

EARTHSMITH by MILTON LESSER

SPILLTHROUGH by DANIEL F. GALOUBE



THE DANGEROUS DOLL

By Daniel F. Galouye

**Nancy was an intelligent doll, built to be
■ child's perfect companion — provided, of course,
her behavior pattern was not short-circuited! . . .**

“PURELY childish non-sense,” Ann’s father said, dropping another slice of

bread through the toast chute and catching it as it fell smoking into his hand. “It’s just that the child is self-centered enough to be resentful of the doll’s presence.”

Ann looked hopefully at her mother.

“I don’t think it’s that, John,” she answered. “Perhaps if the doll were of a slightly different temperament . . . You know Ann isn’t thoroughly sociable. Naturally there would be a conflict of types . . .”

And you’d like to return it,” he interrupted, “and order special compensation circuits? — No, Jane, that’s out. For a playtoy, that thing has cost plenty already enough to have gotten us a new radiomobile so I wouldn’t have to ride to work with the neighbor every morning. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with the doll!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have gotten it, John. Perhaps . . .”

Ann saw her mother bow her head slightly and sigh.

“Now, Jane,” her father said comfortingly. “You’ve only had the doll here a few days. We both agreed on the wisdom of buying it. And we were convinced of its worth



as a molder of emotional stability."

Ann blushed as he turned toward her. "You're going to have to give her a try for at least a couple of weeks, honey. If you haven't learned to love her by then—well, we'll let you pick out another one."

"But, daddy," Ann twisted her napkin. "She is nice and sweet—most of the time. But sometimes she's mean. She looks at me angry-like. And she—"

"Imagination!" he stared at her mother. "Simply imagination! Didn't the salesman convince us cutoff circuits prevent the doll from reacting discordantly?"

A thump sounded on the flat roof and he placed his napkin on the table and raced from the room.

"Please, John." Jane called after him. "Try to find some courteous way to ask Mr. Jasper whether he couldn't let his car down with a little less noise. The roof, you know . . ."

Ann walked to the window and watched the teardrop vehicle carry her father over the horizon.

"Mommy," she asked, still staring into the sky. "I don't have to play with Nancy this morning, do I, huh?"

"Darling!" her mother placed a hand on her shoulder. "Nancy is a beautiful doll! And your father is right—you'll learn to love her."

"But, mommy, she's—she's not like a doll! She's more like a grown lady. She's . . ."

"Why, she's your exact size. She might—talk big at times. That's

because she's going to make you intelligent! But she doesn't act like a grown lady when she's with you—only like a little girl."

Ann sighed. She wished it weren't so cool outside. Then she could play with the other children or with Master, and Nancy could stay locked in the closet.

"Come," her mother led her from the room. "We'll see how Nancy feels this morning. I'll bet she has some wonderful games to play."

ANN stepped with her mother upon the carpet-belt in the hall and it whisked them to the rear of the corridor. Her stomach fluttered a little more than usual when the grav-lift sucked them up to the second floor and another carpet-belt bore them to the door of the solarium.

"It's not too cool outside, mommy," Ann suggested eagerly. "There isn't even any snow on the ground."

"No, dear," her mother opened a closet and took out Nancy. "You're just getting over a cold. You and Nancy play."

"But can't I play with Orville instead?"

"Heavens no! It was all right for you to play with him when he was new. But now his balancing isn't perfect any longer. And I wouldn't want all that junky metal falling on my little girl. Anyway, he has to clean up the downstairs rooms."

Ann was silent as her mother ran a comb through the honey-colored

curls that covered part of Nancy's forehead and straightened the lace-trimmed dress.

"Come here, Ann," she called, arranging the hem. "Come see how nice and warm her skin has kept all night. See?—It's just like your own. Why, she's exactly like a little girl playmate!"

Ann felt the cheeks. They were nice and soft. And Nancy was beautiful. And there weren't very many girls in the entire country whose fathers had bought them one of these new toys. And maybe her father was right—maybe she would really learn to love the doll.

Her mother took the special electric cord from the table and plugged it in a wall receptacle. She ran its other end under Nancy's dress and held it there a moment. Ann tensed, held her breath.

"This is how we feed Nancy," her mother explained. "Nancy has to eat—just like you. Only, she eats electricity!"

When the doll's eyes fluttered open, her mother withdrew the cord.

"Good morning, Ann," said the doll. Then she turned to Ann's mother, "Good morning, mother."

Why did the doll have to call her mother "mother"? Ann wondered. After all, she wasn't her sister.

"Ann!" her mother exclaimed abruptly. "Tell Nancy good morning!"

Ann scuffed a toe on the rug. "'Morning," she said in a low voice as she bowed her head.

Her mother laughed. "I'll leave you two to play."

Ann watched her mother leave, wishing at the same time she would change her mind and stay.

"Little girls shouldn't remain silent so long," Nancy chided after a while, taking Ann's hand. "Come, let's play something."

"I—I don't feel like playing," Ann protested.

"Of course you do," Nancy laughed. "Happy and well little girls always like to play. You are well and I will make you happy."

Ann looked into the doll's eyes. They were a beautiful blue, hidden partly beneath long, silken eyelashes. Her father had told her the eyes weren't real — were just instruments, but instruments which actually saw. The eyes were prettier than her own, she told herself, looking at the reflection of her face in the wall mirror. Nancy's hair—the glistening curls that danced lightly over her shoulders — was prettier too. Much prettier than the straight, black hair that hung like two dog ears on each side of her own face and like a curtain over half her forehead.

"We'll play chase first," Nancy proposed, breaking into a run. "The exercise will be good for you."

Ann half-heartedly walked toward the fleeing doll-playmate.

"Run, Ann! Run!" Nancy coaxed.

Ann hesitated only a moment longer. After all, when Nancy played games she was just like a

little girl. And it was so nice and warm in the solarium this morning that Ann was eager for fun.

SHE raced after the nimble doll, pursued her closely as she dashed behind a chair and under a table. The doll's light laughter rang through the room and Ann's voice joined merrily in the fun. Nancy ran along the sun-bathed glass wall, rubbing her hand across the panes, and Ann followed suit. They made two more laps around the room, dodging chairs and scrambling under tables, before Ann finally maneuvered the doll into a corner and touched her arm.

"I caught you!" she cried gleefully. "I caught you! Now it's your turn!" She whirled and ran in the other direction.

But after racing halfway across the room, she stopped suddenly and turned. Nancy wasn't following. The doll was just standing there, staring at the wall.

"Come on, Nancy," Ann shouted. "You've got to catch me!"

But still the doll did not move. Frowning, Ann walked back. There was a little stream of smoke coming from beneath her collar, from where her neck joined her shoulders.

"Nancy!" she shouted. "What's the matter?"

The smoke stream disappeared and the doll shook her head and smiled. "Watch out!" she laughed, lurching forward, "I'm going to catch you!"

Ann screamed delightfully, turn-

ed and raced away again, the doll following closely. Their laughter rang out for a moment. But suddenly Ann realized that only she was laughing. She glanced over her shoulder. Nancy was still racing after her. But the smile was gone and the eyes did not seem as pretty as before. They reminded her of Jackie Madson's eyes just before he pulled her hair until she cried last summer.

"Nancy!" she cried. "Don't you want to play any more?" Ann stopped and backed away from the advancing doll.

But Nancy said nothing, her eyes becoming even harder. Then the doll was upon Ann, bringing her hands up and thrusting them against Ann's chest. The girl fell backwards, frightened over the doll's sudden change.

She tried to rise, but Nancy pushed her down again. She screamed. The hard stare was still in the doll's eyes and her dainty fingers were clenched tightly as she kicked her in the side. Ann rolled over, but the doll followed, kicking her again. The girl screamed louder and started crying as she leaped up and raced for the door.

"Ann! Ann!" her mother was suddenly standing in the doorway. The child rushed into her arms, sobbing. "What's the matter, darling?"

But the child could not bring her breath under control.

"She became frightened, mother," she heard the doll say, "and fell

down. I tried to help her get up, but she pushed me away and tripped over the footstool. Isn't she feeling well?"

"It's not true, mother!" Ann sobbed. "It's not . . ."

"Hush, now," her mother said, "I'm surprised at you, Ann—trying to hurt your doll. Don't you know there's a chance you might break her? And she cost your father a lot of money."

"But, mommy," Ann's eyes became wide with protest. "I didn't fall. She—pushed me!"

"Even if she did, darling," her mother brushed disheveled hair from her face, "it was an accident. Honey, Nancy can't hurt you! Nancy is as sweet as any little girl you've ever known. And she's going to teach you a lot of things."

"That's right, Ann," Nancy assured. "Why, you'll even know how to write a hundred new words in a week."

"Oh, mommy!" Ann cried. "I don't want to play with her anymore. She's mean and I'm afraid of her! And she *did* push me—and kicked me too!"

"*Ann!*" her mother exclaimed incredulously.

"I'm afraid she *isn't* feeling well, mother," the doll purred. "Perhaps if she doesn't care to play with me . . ."

"She *is* going to play with you, Nancy," Ann heard her mother say. "But not now. She's going to spend the day in bed for lying. And when her father comes home he'll hear

about her rudeness. You can tell him the entire story tonight after supper."

"After supper!" Ann sobbed. "Oh, mommy—Nancy's not going to eat with us?"

"She won't be eating. But she will sit at the table. Your father hasn't had a chance to talk with her yet."

"**G**REAT! Great!" Ann's father said gustily, applauding. "Why that was executed like a classic ballet!"

Ann, hidden in the huge chair whose size made her look even smaller, glanced dejectedly at her father, then at her mother who was also applauding. She turned her eyes to Nancy, still frozen in her bow in the center of the winecolored carpet.

"Why, John," Ann's mother said. "She dances as beautifully as she sings. It's almost unbelievable that a toy can be made so human!"

"I've quit wondering what they will come up with next," he declared, "in this day of half-hour flights to Titan and with matter-transmission only around the corner."

"Darling," Ann's mother was suddenly calling across the room, "do you suppose you'll ever learn to dance like Nancy?"

Ann looked dispiritedly at the floor.

"She is going to teach you, you know?" her mother continued.

"I don't want to dance like her," Ann snapped.

"Why Ann!" her mother began.

"Let me handle this, dear," her father was suddenly standing, glowering down at her. "Young lady, he scowled, "your attitude calls for a good—"

"No, father," Nancy had crossed the floor and was tugging at his trouser leg. "You might just make her more resentful of me. It's been assumed that our presence might not be accepted immediately by children. And we have been conditioned with behavior that would take that in consideration."

Ann tightened her hands into fists. It wasn't natural for dolls to talk like grown persons. And it wasn't natural for a little girl's doll to tell her father what to do. She wished more desperately than ever that her father hadn't bought Nancy. She wished her mother would let her play with Betty again. Betty was a simple doll—not as pretty as Nancy—not nearly as smart. She could only answer simple questions and talk about nursery rhymes. But she was lovable and she did what you told her, like dolls should.

"Darling," Ann's mother was standing beside her father now, with Nancy between them, "in another week you'll be laughing at how you disliked Nancy. Look how pretty she is." She held the doll up even with Ann's eyes. "Why I'll bet there are some fathers and mothers who would be willing to have Nancy for their own little girl!"

"Jane," her father said abruptly,

"it's almost eight . Remember?—We'd promised the Ashley's a game of arthron tonight. We'll just have time to warm up the visi-screen in the den."

"I thought that was tomorrow night?"

"No, tomorrow night we actually visit them."

"Oh. Shall I put Ann to bed?"

"It's a little early. Why not let the children—I mean Ann and Nancy play a little while?"

ONLY half-attentive to Nancy's pirouetting in the center of the room, Ann listened to the subdued voices of her mother and father and the more dominant, artificial voices of Mr. and Mrs. Ashley, amplified by the den communicator's audio-receptor.

"You're not watching me, Ann," the doll stopped her dance. "How do you expect to learn?"

Ann only stared at the doll.

"Would you rather sing with me?" Nancy asked.

Folding her arms, Ann sank lower into the chair, not caring whether her sulking was obvious.

The doll imitated a sigh and spread her hands despairingly. Then she left the room.

Ann disinterestedly wished the doll would just as simply walk out the house and not return. Suddenly she wanted to be a boy. Boys could do a lot more than girls. Why, they could even run away from home. Just last summer Jimmy, who lived next door—only three miles away

—did just that. He had a lot of fun, too, before they found him and his father's radiomobile on Callisto.

She was just considering asking her mother to put her to bed when she looked up and saw the huge bulk standing in the doorway.

"Orville!" she began. "What are you doing . . . ?" But then she remembered Orville could not hear and talk.

The giant automaton lumbered into the room. He still had on his vacuum draft attachment, the large tube jutting from his chest at an angle and meeting the floor where it flared out into an oblong funnel.

Orville was in the center of the room now. But Ann's stare was attracted back to the doorway. Nancy was entering, cradling in her arms the automaton's control box. Eagerly, she fingered the dials and switches. The bulk of machinery altered its course and advanced on Ann's chair. At first, the girl only stared indifferently at the robot. She knew Nancy had done wrong by taking him out of his closet. But she was dwelling on the more pleasant recollection of the last time Orville held her in his carriage-attachment arms and wheeled at neck-break speed around the house, controlled by her father.

Orville was standing over her now, his glistening metal reflecting the light from wall-ceiling junctures. Ann wondered whether Nancy hadn't thought of some new game to play with the automaton; attempted to guess what was supposed to hap-

pen next.

The robot, responding to the doll's manipulation of the control box, raised two of his more ponderous household attachments and held them in the air over Ann's head.

The child glanced between Orville's wheels and saw the doll's face. Nancy didn't seem like she was playing a game. The hate was back in her eyes and she was looking mean as she brought the control box up before her.

Ann didn't like what was happening. Perhaps, she thought, she should tell her mother that Nancy was playing with the domestic automaton. She leaped from the chair and ducked between the wheels of the undercarriage. But, even as she ran for the door, she heard the crash and spun around to look.

Orville's upraised attachments had slammed down. The chair, its back and seat crushed by the force of the blow, was a shambles of torn upholstery and exposed plastic bracing.

Ann stopped sharply and turned on the doll. "Look what you did!" she scolded. "Mother!" she shouted. "Mother!"

The hall-carpet whirled into swift motion as Nancy backed away, dropping the control box. Ann picked it up and rushed to the door to meet her mother and father, who were just entering.

"Mother!" she cried. "Look what Nancy did!"

But her mother and father weren't looking at her. They were star-

ing questioningly at the doll. Ann glanced at Nancy. The doll was shaking her head convincingly.

"Give me that, Ann," her father said sharply, walking toward her and stretching his hand toward the control box. "You know you must never take Orville out."

"But, daddy," she began. "I . . ."

"If there's anything I won't tolerate," he scowled, "it's a little girl who denies her guilt when it's obvious she's done something wrong."

He lifted her from the floor and brought her over to the divan. Ann didn't even squirm when he turned her over on his knee. She met the fury of his palm numbly—crying not from fear, but only when she was forced to do so from pain.

EVEN above the sound of her sobs, she heard the voices of her parents drifting into her bedroom. She tried not to listen, wishing instead that she could force her troubles out of her mind and the doll out of her life.

"I'm honestly worried about it, John," she heard. "Perhaps the influence of the doll isn't good."

"Not at all, dear. It takes time for a child to become conditioned. We were told that, weren't we? But after she accepts it, it'll mean all the difference in the world. They're wonderful for adjusting a child, you know."

"But so far Nancy has only made Ann mean and deceitful—and destructive."

"Let's just call it the undercurrent

of adaptation. She'll get over it."

"But, John . . ."

"The doll stays, Jane. That's final!"

Ann hid her face in the pillow to drown her sobs. If she could only just once have Betty back. She used to sleep with Betty every night. And the simple doll was so good and lovable! It didn't make any difference that her hands weren't even separated into fingers, or that she wasn't as clean as when she first came from the store.

RAIN beat upon the solarium's large pane and trickled down in rivulets. Ann often liked to watch the low, gray clouds hug the nearby hills in dismal weather. But today she wasn't looking at the landscape. Instead, she kept the doll in the center of her vision in an almost fixed stare. She was desperately afraid of Nancy. And she was determined that she should be ready to run from the room the moment the doll did anything suspicious or even approached her.

"You're not very talkative this morning, Ann," the doll said, toying with the latch on the toy chest.

Ann looked out the window and absently watched her father's hound, Master, lying motionless beneath the glass roof of the kennel. She wished the family hadn't decreed Master was now too big and rough to play with her. Determinedly, she returned her cold stare to Nancy.

"I hate you," she said, unemo-

tionally.

"Little girls," the doll began automatically, "should be incapable of hate. Come over here and I will tell you how tenderly the mother zandron cares for her young and how the cubs never leave the mother."

"I hate you," Ann repeated, edging closer to the doorway.

"Why do you hate me, Ann?" Nancy asked solicitously.

"You are mean and you want to hurt me."

Nancy said nothing, raised the lid of the toy chest and let it drop.

"Why do you want to hurt me, Nancy?" the girl asked.

The doll turned and stared at her. "I have no reason to want to do you any harm," she laughed. "Little girls only want to hurt others when they are angry or jealous. And I'm not jealous of you. I'm much prettier than you. Notice how thin your legs are. Mine are nice and plump. And your eyes are squinted and expressionless. Your skin is pale and rough. And mine "

Nancy ran her fingers over her cheek and brushed back springy curls to expose a dainty ear. "I am ■ pretty little girl," she boasted. "Mother and father think I'm beautiful."

"They're *not* your mother and father!" Ann protested, stomping her foot.

"But of course they are, Ann," Nancy insisted. "Why, even last evening father called us 'the children.' And mother said she would

be glad to have me as her own daughter."

"She did not!" Ann raged. "She said *some* mothers and fathers would."

"But we know what she meant," Nancy smiled. "Anyway, I am more talented than you could ever be. Why, you could never sing and dance and tell stories like me."

Ann tried to hold back the tears, but her eyes became moist anyway. She wanted to run crying to her mother. But the doll was opening the toy chest. She reached inside as Ann crossed the floor.

"What's this?" Nancy asked, holding up a doll whose clothes were ruffled.

"Betty!" Ann cried. "Don't you touch her!"

She pushed Nancy aside and reached for the smaller doll. Anger twisting her features, Nancy stepped back and swung the doll by its arm. The flesh-like body arched through the air and slammed against Ann's head, knocking her to the floor.

But Ann wasn't concerned with the pain of the blow and the fall. She watched Betty, dangling by an almost severed arm from Nancy's hand. Nancy looked at Betty, laughed and grasped the smaller doll between both hands, pulling the arm from its socket.

"She's an old, broken doll now," Nancy said boastfully.

"Give her to me!" Ann sobbed.

"I'll give her to you!" Nancy's voice sounded coarser now, more

mechanical. And again there were curlers of smoke rising from her neck joint. She swung the smaller doll over her head and hurled it at Ann, who was rising.

The doll slammed into her face and she fell again, this time erupting into unrestrained tears.

"Mother!" cried Nancy shrilly. "Mother! You'd better come quickly! Ann is having a tantrum!"

ANN'S grin was wide, showing both rows of teeth, as she sat on the window seat in the solarium. She reached over and touched her mother's hand, smiling up at her.

"Is there really something wrong with Nancy, mommy?" she asked, looking at the man who was bending over the table, his back to them.

"Sh-h-h, darling," her mother answered. "We'll find out in a little while, as soon as the technician finishes testing her."

"Then you *do* believe she was mean to me, mommy?" the child asked eagerly. "You don't think I was lying when I said she pushed me?"

"I don't know, Ann. We'll find out when the man gets through looking at her."

Ann became quiet. But the smile did not leave. She stretched her neck and tried to glance over the shoulder of the technician to see what was happening to Nancy. But she could see nothing. So she glanced out the window and waved to Master playing in his kennel.

The technician turned and cleared

his throat. "There's a feed-through between two emotional-balancer circuits," he said. "One of them is being overloaded. That's what caused the smoke you saw coming from her neck."

"Is it serious?" Ann's mother asked. "Could it cause the doll to act—well, unruly?"

The troubleshooter raised an eyebrow. "Unruly?—I doubt it seriously. There are built-in inhibitor circuits to prevent any uncharacteristic actions. All our products are guaranteed against that."

"But," Ann's mother shook her head, "it seems to me that if something could go wrong with the main behavior circuits, then something can also be defective in the safety circuits."

Ann watched the expression on the technician's face. It was much like the one on Tommy's face when he had refused to tell his father whether he had stolen the tubes from the house's capacity intruder-repeller.

"The doll will have to be returned for further analyses," he said sharply. "I've bled the charge so it'll remain inactive until tomorrow when a crew can pick it up."

"Nancy is going to be taken away, mother!" Ann exclaimed gleefully. "She won't come back, will she, mommy? She won't."

"I'm sure they'll be able to fix her so that she'll be all right again, darling."

"But mommy, I don't want her to come back. We can have Betty

fixed, can't we? And .

But Ann's mother had left the solarium to see the technician to the door.

Ann walked gingerly to the table where Nancy lay and looked misgivingly at the doll. She was asleep now. But Ann wished she were awake so she could tell her she was sick and had to go to—to a hospital. But the doll was lifeless—her long eyelashes touching her cheek and her honey-colored curls spread in disarray on the table.

LATER that evening Ann sat on the divan in the den, her eyes focused on the large visi-screen. The scene she watched was the play room of the Ashleys. She had not signaled the Ashley's for reception, so she felt guilty spying on her mother and father during their visit. It was well past the time she was to have gone to bed.

Tired of watching the grownups sitting around and chatting, she yawned and let herself sink into the soft plush of the sofa. Her eyelids had closed several times and she was almost asleep when she heard the slight *thump* from elsewhere in the house. Curious, she sat up and listened sharply. But there was no additional noise. Still wondering what had caused the disturbance, however, she glanced at Master, asleep on the thick mat near the screen. It could not have been the dog. Warily, she walked from the den and rode the carpet-belt to the lift at the rear of the

corridor. The upstairs belt whisked her down the hall—toward the solarium, where a light was shining.

Then she was standing in the doorway, sweeping the room with her eyes. She gasped as she saw that the table where Nancy had lain was bare. The noise, she realized, must have been the doll leaping to the floor. But where was Nancy?

The motion — against the wall near the corner—was slight, but it was abrupt enough to catch her attention. It was the doll! She was lying on her side, her face toward the center of the room. But her eyes were still closed. Ann tiptoed cautiously forward, her arms spread tensely behind her and her head stretched forward, peering.

Nancy was not sleeping! The movement of her shoulders betrayed that fact. The doll's arms were twisted behind her. An electric cord, dangling from the socket in the wall above Nancy, swung lightly, jerking occasionally in time with the twisting motions of her arms.

Ann rushed over, realizing Nancy was inserting the plug in her back. But before the girl could get to the doll, Nancy opened her eyes and smiled, rolling over and rising. The cord hung from her back in an arc that swept up to the wall receptacle.

"They didn't take all the strength out of Nancy," the doll said gaily. "They left a little—enough.

Ann gasped as the doll walked away from the wall, her motion snapping the plug from her back.

"Let's play, Ann," the doll sug-

gested, arranging the curls about her forehead.

Ann backed away fearfully.

"I won't hurt you," Nancy said. "Come, we will hold hands and dance."

The doll's unexpected attitude puzzled Ann and she was curiously motionless while Nancy reached out and caught her hands. Then the doll swung her around in circles in time with a tune she started humming.

But suddenly the doll stopped, stiffened—her eyes closing. Ann, alarmed, tried to draw her hands loose, but Nancy would not release them.

"Let me go!" the girl shouted, trembling. Then she beseeched, "Please, Nancy, you're hurting me!"

Ann gasped again, her eyes opening wide with terror.

Smoke was rising from the doll's neck—two dense streams that infiltrated Nancy's hair, creating the illusion her head was smoldering. Then the doll trembled violently, tightening her grip on the child's wrists.

Ann cried out in pain and tried to wrench loose. And, as she screamed, she was aware the doll had opened her eyes and was staring intently into her face.

"Please, Nancy! Please!" she cried, terror-stricken.

Abruptly, the doll freed her and she turned to run. But she felt the dainty hands grasp her hair and pull fiercely. The strength in Nancy's fingers was startling! Ann

screamed again as she felt strands of hair being pulled from her scalp. She tried to run, but Nancy grasped her shoulder and twisted her around. And, while she still used one hand to maintain a grip on the girl's hair, she slapped Ann again and again until her cheek was red.

Sobbing hysterically, the girl pushed with all her might against the doll's chest and succeeded in sending her reeling backward. Then she whirled and raced for the hall. But the doll ran after her.

"DON'T run away, Ann," Nancy shrieked. "Stay and play. I know some lovely games. Perhaps I'll even find a way to make your hair as pretty as mine. And I'll teach you how to dance and sing. And mother and father will love you as much as they do me."

Ann reached the hallway, her sobs unrestrained, and stepped on the carpet. But before her weight could activate the belt drive, Nancy pulled her back into the room. Her grip, however, was not firm and the girl broke away once more. This time she raced back into the room, but only because the doll was now standing in the doorway.

Nancy laughed, pink hands on her hips.

"Come, Ann," she cried. "Come play! I'll recite for you — Little Sammy Saturn couldn't fly a pattern Or maybe you'd prefer to learn some new words. How about 'exogenesis'? Wouldn't you like to learn how to spell that . . Or may-

be you're ready for postulatory logic
."

The doll advanced as she spoke, a queer, lopsided smile on her face. But her small voice was drowned out by the frantic barking of Master. Ann imagined she could see the large dog standing near the lift, his nape hairs bristling in response to her screams. She wondered whether the dog would overcome his fear of the lift. He could never be coaxed to use it, not since he was a puppy and her father had mistakenly turned off the ground-floor switch while the dog was descending.

Nancy abandoned her slow advance and broke into a run for the child. Screaming more frenziedly, Ann fled toward the glass wall, the doll following. The girl raced along the wall, glancing frantically over her shoulder. Reaching the corner, she began a dash for the door, but the doll immediately altered her course and raced to head her off.

• Realizing she was running toward the crazed Nancy, Ann turned and speeded once more for the glass wall; stood there panting and staring at the doll. Nancy no longer wore her false smile. Her face was drawn into ugly lines and there was only hate in her eyes. The smoke from her neck was denser and there was an occasional spark leaping toward her hair. But the internal fury seemed only to add to the hated actions of the doll. She walked slowly to a rack near the door

and grasped the mallet which Ann had used often in playing lawn asteroids with her father.

Swinging the club over her head, Nancy strode determinedly toward the girl. Tears streaming down her reddened cheeks, Ann screeched and fled. This time she ducked behind the large chair and skirted around the toy table. The mallet crashed down resoundingly on the surface of the table and smashed its way through thin metal. As Ann raced along the wall, the doll tried to raise the weapon over her head to continue the chase.

But the mallet would not come up. Its rounded striking surface, Ann saw, was wedged in the jagged hole it had made in the table. As the doll tried to wrench her weapon free, Ann lunged for the door. She had gained an advantage while the doll struggled to regain use of the mallet. But the advantage was a meager one. Even as Ann reached the door, the doll pulled the weapon free and began her dash across the room.

ANN jumped on the carpet and felt the mechanism whirl into motion. Presently she was being carried toward the rear lift—but not fast enough. Glancing hysterically over her shoulder, she saw the doll had already stepped upon the carpet-belt and was gaining additional speed by racing along the moving strip. Ann cried out apprehensively and began running also.

At the lift, she leaped into the square hole and felt the unseen forces of the field grip her body and lower it gently toward the ground level—gently and slowly, but much too slowly. As her eyes swept below the level of the ceiling, her heart leaped gladdeningly at the sight of Master, barking furiously and pacing frenziedly just beyond the effective area of the field.

Her feet touched the floor. She knew Nancy could not be far from the lift and would be descending within a second. Then her eyes swept over the wall to her left; took in the grav-lift switch just above her head. She reached for the button. But her arm was not long enough. Frantically, she looked overhead. Nancy was just stepping off the floor and into the lift field.

Bending her knees, Ann stretched her arm overhead and leaped. Her finger touched the button and pressed. The doll, no longer protected against normal fall, plunged the rest of the way and crashed to the floor. A shower of sparks flew from the neck joint, falling harmlessly about the doll.

Ann backed away, still sobbing. The doll twitched spasmodically as an occasional spark leaped from her neck. But the sparks were becom-

ing less frequent and their intensity weaker. Finally the doll lay motionless.

Master sniffed and advanced cautiously to the edge of the lift area. Pushing his snout still farther and apparently detecting normal gravity, he lunged forward and clamped his mouth around the doll's chest. Then he shook her mightily between his massive jaws. An arm, its hand still clutching the mallet, tore loose and flew against the wall. Then the head was wrenched off, followed by one of the legs.

The dog was still shaking Nancy when Ann dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around its shaggy neck, laughing and sobbing at the same time.

* *

"No, darling," her mother said as she fluffed the pillow under her head. "There will be no more Nancies."

"Mommy," Ann asked, "can I have Betty back? She's a good doll. We can have her arm fixed

But you know something?—Maybe even Betty talks too much. Can't we have the hospital fix her so she'll say maybe just one word? Tell them to make it so she'll just be able to say 'momma'."

THE END

NEXT MONTH'S NOVEL:—

ARMAGEDDON, 1970!

By GEOFF ST. REYNARD

BIG OCTOBER ISSUE ON SALE AUGUST 14th —
BUT SEE PAGE 162 TO GET FREE COPY!

Atomic Planes Will Fly!

IT'S no secret that the atomic submarine is well on its way to completion, but the Government is being a little more coy when it comes to an atomic plane—it suggests that “preliminary” work is being done. Actually it takes no great genius to discover that if you can build an atomic engine to power a sub, you can do the same for a plane.

The atomic engine for a plane is a tough problem though, and except for research it is doubtful if it will ever be widely used. Its inherent nature makes it too deadly an apparatus. It's hard to visualize a thousand-mile-an-hour atomic plane roaring across the sky, deadly radioactive blasts spilling from its exhausts and poisoning the atmosphere.

There is nothing mysterious or exotic about an atomic plane. The engine consists of an atomic pile using uranium or plutonium—a sort of super-furnace—which will be used to heat a gas or liquid which in turn will be fed to a turbine driving ■ propellor.

Changing this to a jet or rocket is simple and that is probably how atomic energy will finally be used as ■ driving force for air (or space!) ships. Such ships can be operated in the atmosphere on auxiliary chemical rockets which will be switched to atomic blasts when once in space. In this way you won't spray the country with devastating radiations—an important idea which has bothered more than one person!

★ *The Vanishing Tin Can* ★

ONCE “tin” was synonymous with “cheap.” “Tin Lizzies,” “tinny,” “tin can”—all implied junk, but times change. Right now tin is worth its weight in diamonds. That this is so is easy to see; reflect for a moment just in the food industries themselves and you see the modern age described as one of tin. The tin can is a necessity of civilization.

Unfortunately tin is hard to get. The mines are running out and there are a lot more important uses for tin in solder, bearing metals, and a host of other things. A substitute has to be found—fortunately that's being taken care of! We'll still be able to pull the classic gag about “the wife cooking out of tin cans .”

The substitute is of course of the

one metal there seems to be no dearth of since it constitutes an enormous portion of the Earth's crust—aluminum. It doesn't have the nice food-acid resistant properties of tin, but it can be coated with plastic which has, and already such “tinless” tin cans are available. The other out is a plastic or aluminum coated steel can.

Countless billions of tin cans are made yearly and even though they only have the thinnest coating of that rare metal on their insides, it's still too much. The age of the tin can is passing. The future will have to coin a word to take the place of tin can but “alu-can” doesn't seem to hit it. If speech inertia means anything they'll be calling them tin cans in the year two thousand!



THEFT

By

Bill Venable

With little green men telling him what to write, Thompson was certain he had flipped his lid. His psychiatrist agreed—until he read the stories!

THOMPSON poured himself a shot of rye and downed it in one quick movement. He then pulled out his tobacco pouch, filled his pipe and applied a flaming match to the bowl. He puffed clouds of fragrant smoke. He frowned deeply. It was a good frown because Thompson was an expert in the art of frowning. This particular frown was a frown of irritated exasperation, because Thompson was an author, and it was late at night, and he'd drunk a quarter of a fifth of rye and smoked eleven pipefuls of tobacco and played four LP records, and he still had no ideas. His head swam from the effects of the whisky, and the tobacco, and the records; but he persevered in his search for An Idea for a Story.

He searched among his records for *Le Coq d'Or* and put it on the phonograph, at bass tone and loud volume. After the first few bars he got up and took it off, still a

man without inspiration. He played Hindemith's *Variations on a Theme by Russell* next. Utterly useless. He tried *The Age of Anxiety* and followed it with *Petrouchka*; intermittently he sat down and pondered passages from *Rubaiyat*. All to no avail.

About this time the little green men came out of the woodwork. They didn't emerge from the woodwork in the manner one might expect—i.e. squeezing through cracks and knotholes like mice and spiders. They just sort of materialized out of it, rather like they had walked through it. There were four of them.

Thompson took his pipe from his mouth and looked at them.

"Ah," he murmured. "Yes indeed." He knocked the ashes from his pipe and got up from his chair. He put the whisky back in the cupboard and took the record off. Then he sat down again and re-

garded the little green men. He closed his eyes tightly and held them closed for a minute or so. He opened them and looked at the green men again. Then he rubbed his eyes and pounded his head with his hands. The green men sat in mid-air and stared at him. Thompson regarded them as coldly as possible.

"Well," said the nearest green man, "Aren't you going to say hello?"

Thompson swallowed. "Hello," he managed after a moment.

"Hello," rejoined the other.

THOMPSON nodded his head affably and remained silent. Presently he went to the cupboard and got out the whisky; he poured a shot and downed it in one quick movement. Then he filled his pipe and lit it. He puffed clouds of smoke and stared at the green men through a blue haze.

"Well," said the nearest green man again, "Aren't you glad?"

Thompson nodded genially.

"We're here to help you write ■ story, you know," pursued the other.

"Oh." Thompson brightened. "Good. Got any ideas?"

"Naturally. What would you like to write about? Romance? Adventure? Mystery? Fantasy?"

"Let's try—" Thompson pursed his lips and looked at the ceiling, "a short mystery. Something with a surprise ending that lays you out."

"Easy," said the other. "Try this."

He began narrating.

Thompson relaxed in his chair and puffed more clouds of smoke. Presently his face lit up. His eyes dilated and his pupils diminished to specks.

"Ah!" He exclaimed. He pulled his chair up to the typewriter and started typing notes, interspersing the green man's narrative with muttered exclamations.

The green man finished with an ending that sent Thompson over backwards in his chair. Thompson extricated himself and set up the chair again. "Terrific!" he said. "It'll make my fortune!"

"It will," assented the green man.

"What do you want for it?" inquired Thompson craftily.

"Nothing," responded the vision.

"Oh yes," said Thompson. "Nothing. Certainly. Well," he withdrew a stack of typewriter paper from his cluttered desk, "I certainly thank you fellows. Goodbye." He inserted a sheet in the typewriter.

"Oh, we're not leaving," said the off-color gnome.

"You will," said Thompson imperturbably. "In the morning. I'll have a headache but you'll be gone."

"Suit yourself," said the green man. He and his companions rose a foot in the air and sat suspended again. Thompson began to type. Now and then he looked at the green men and smiled, and turned

back to his click-clacking on the typewriter.

Twenty double-spaced pages later he was done. He made a neat stack of the sheets and shoved them into an envelope, handily pre-addressed to the editorial offices of one of the more prominent magazines. He sealed the envelope and slapped postage on it. Then he walked three flights down from his apartment to the street, slipped the envelope into a mailbox, and staggered back up to bed.

HE awoke, true to his prediction, with a raging headache. He sat up in bed and looked around the room for the little green men. They were nowhere to be seen. His doubts assuaged, he rose stiffly from his bed and careened off the chest-of-drawers into the bathroom, where he swallowed three aspirins in a glass of water. He turned on the water to see if it was hot, letting it run over his fingers. It was. He took a steaming shower and followed it with an icy one. Then he rubbed himself down with a Turkish towel and, the towel precariously wrapped around his middle, went back into the bedroom. His eyes bugged out and he tripped on the edge of the rug and fell heavily to the floor. When he got up four green men were still sitting complacently on a shaft of sunlight that poured in through the Venetian blind.

Thompson's mouth opened and

closed but nothing came out.

"See," said the nearest green man. "I told you so. And don't take on so," he added in alarm. "You'll dislocate your jaw."

Thompson turned his back to the vision and went into the cupboard. He poured a shot of rye and downed it in one quick movement. The bottle in his hand, he sat down on the edge of the bed, regaining his composure.

"Why do you do that?" inquired the gnome with curiosity.

"If I'm going to go on seeing you," Thompson explained, "I may as well be drunk. It helps."

"You mean you still attribute our existence to the effects of alcohol?" inquired the other.

"Oh no," Thompson denied vigorously. "To the bitters."

"You jest," said the gnome in hurt tones. "Don't you want to become a great author?"

"Certainly," Thompson agreed hastily. "You mean you have more ideas?"

"An infinite number," said the green man, waving a deprecatory hand. "We thought of an excellent novel," he added, "while you slept last night. Do you want to hear it?"

"Of course!" Thompson jerked on his shorts. "Wait, though. I need breakfast first." He writhed into a shirt.

"Plenty of time," said the greenie. "While you're gone, we'll assimilate some more ideas."

"Good," said Thompson, pulling on his trousers. "Shall I bring you something to eat?"

"We don't eat," said the other airily. "You can bring a spotlight, though. We can sit best on a beam of light."

"Right," said Thompson. He opened the door.

"Goodbye," remarked the gnome.

"Goodbye," Thompson hurried from the room.

THOMPSON closed the door of the phone booth behind him. "Hello," he said. "I'd like to make an appointment with Doctor Vossman. Today, if possible."

"Just a mom-ent," said the secretary. He heard her riffle through some papers. "What date did you say you wanted an appointment?"

"Today!" Thompson repeated. His breathing into the mouthpiece came out quite clearly in the receiver against his ear.

"Doctor Vossman can see you today at three. What is the name, please?"

"Thompson. Laurence Thompson."

"Very well, sir. Today at three."

"OK." Thompson hung up and emerged from the phone booth. His ham and eggs were ready at the counter and he sat down and wolfed them. He counted his money as he went out and decided to stop in the hardware store down the street and buy a spotlight.

When he got back to his apart-

ment the sunlight was coming in the window at a forty-five degree angle and the gnomes were almost sitting on the floor. Thompson plugged in the spotlight and turned the beam upward. "There," he told the green men. "That okay?"

"Thank you," said the nearest gnome. The whole group rose in the air and floated over to the spotlight beam, sitting rather comfortably on the edge of it. "We thought of three excellent short stories while you were away. Would you like to hear them?"

"Yeah, sure" responded Thompson. Might as well take advantage of the situation while it lasted.

"Very well," said the nearest green man. "Here's the first one."

* *

At two o'clock Thompson jerked the last sheet of the last story from the typewriter. He went to the cupboard and got out a coat and tie. "I'm going to lunch," he told the gnomes, knotting the tie as he talked. "I'll be back pretty soon."

"Fine," beamed the speaker for the little men.

"Well," said Thompson uncomfortably, slipping into his coat. "You want anything more?"

"We're nicely comfortable, thank you," said the green man. "Goodbye."

"Be seein' you," Thompson slammed the door behind him and added to himself, "I hope not."

* * *

The sign on the door said:

HERMAN VOSSMAN:
PSYCHIATRIST

Walk in

Thompson walked in. There was nobody in the outer office so he walked to the inner office door and knocked.

"Come in," answered a German accent.

Thompson entered and beheld a small, thin, bespectacled man seated behind a modernistic steel desk.

"Ah," said this apparition. "You are Laurence Thompson. Sit down. Sorry no one was in the outer office but my secretary is out to lunch. What can I do for you."

"Well," said Thompson. "This is kind of hard to say, Doctor, but I'm — seeing things. Hallucinations."

"What are you seeing, Mr. Thompson?"

Thompson fingered the end of his tie. "Little green men."

"Ah," said the doctor. He leaned forward in his chair. "And what do these little green men do?"

"They give me ideas for stories. I'm an author."

"That is all they do?"

"They sit on a beam of light, too."

"Oh yes." The doctor took off his spectacles and began to polish them. "On a beam of light, of course. When and how did you first see these little men?"

"Well," Thompson ran nervous fingers through his hair, "Last night

was when I first saw them. They came out of the woodwork."

"Last night—" began the doctor with a flash of intuition.

"I was drunk," said Thompson.

"Of course," agreed the doctor. He put his spectacles back on. "Then you have nothing to worry about; at least not in my line of work. Perhaps you should see a physician, delirium tremens is not in my line. Unless you wish me to cure your alcoholism—"

Thompson waved a hand. "Uh uh. Last night I didn't mind so much. But they were there this morning too." He leaned forward toward the doctor. "Would you say I am drunk now?"

"Hard to tell," rejoined the doctor, fluttering his fingers. "Offhand, I would say, no."

"Well," Thompson, "the little green men were still there when I left my apartment at two today."

"I see," said the doctor. "That makes a difference, of course."

"Haven't had but one shot of rye since last night, either."

"Yes, of course," murmured the psychiatrist. "And do you think they are still in your apartment now?"

Thompson shrugged. "Hard to tell."

"Then," said the doctor confidently, "there is only one thing to do. We shall go to your apartment and see." He rose from his chair.

"Good enough," replied Thompson.

“NOW,” said Thompson, “we will see if they’ve gone.”

He opened the door and peered into the room. He shuddered and entered the apartment; the doctor followed and closed the door.

“Are they here?” inquired the doctor, glancing about the room.

Thompson nodded and pointed. “Sitting on the beam of the spotlight.”

“Ah yes.” The doctor gazed uncomfortably at the spotlight and gave a sigh. He pushed Thompson over to the bed. “Lie down,” he said. “Do you have a medicine cabinet?”

“In the bathroom, Doc.” Thompson pointed.

The doctor nodded and went into the bathroom and opened the cabinet. He took out a bottle of antihistamine tablets and shook three into his hand. He drew a glass of water and walked back to Thompson’s bedside.

“Sit up,” he said. “Here, take these.”

Thompson downed the pills and took a swallow of water. The doctor set the glass on the bedside table and went over and turned off the spotlight.

“Now,” muttered the doctor. He turned on the lamp beside the bed and wrapped a green shirt around the bulb, tying the sleeves together at the top. He turned the lamp on Thompson’s face. “You say the little men give you ideas for stories. Eh?”

Thompson shut his eyes and nodded. “On the desk. See?”

“Oh!” The doctor exhaled. “You write the stories down?”

“Naturally. They’re great.”

The doctor walked around to the desk, picked up one of the manuscripts. He whistled softly. “Just relax,” he said, turning to Thompson. “I’m going to read these over.”

“Sure, doc.” Thompson stretched out comfortably on the bed.

AN hour later the doctor was finishing the last story and humming softly to himself. He laid down the manuscript and fluttered his fingers airily. His face was a mask.

“Now, Thompson,” he said. “Look around the room. Are the little green men still here?”

Thompson opened his eyes and gazed about the room. “Yep,” he said finally. “Over there in the corner, up by the ceiling.”

The doctor didn’t even look. He took off his spectacles and inserted them carefully in his coat pocket. Then he fished a quarter from his hip pocket and held it up between two fingers.

“Thompson,” he said softly. “Look.”

Thompson looked. The quarter spun. The lamp above his face cast a soft green light.

“The little green men aren’t there, Thompson.”

“Yes, they are,” remarked Thompson petulantly.

"No, they're not," soothed the doctor.

"Yes."

"No." said the doctor firmly.

"No?" inquired Thompson sleepily.

"No.

"You imagined them," breathed the doctor. "They aren't there. Not there at all. Can you hear me, Thompson?"

"Yes."

"Now forget all about your little green men. You can forget about them. You will forget about them." The doctor's voice was a monotone. "They . . . never were there. You will never see them again. Never, Thompson. Never see them again. Never again. Thompson. Now go to sleep. You've been dreaming.

Thompson relaxed.

"Thompson?"

The sleeping man lay still, eyes shut, breathing even. The doctor exhaled softly.

* * *

"Why did you do that?" queried the nearest green man. "He's convinced. He'll never see us again."

"Naturally," said the doctor. He didn't even turn around. He got his spectacles out of his pocket and adjusted them on his nose. He turned to face the little green men.

"Come on," he said, waving a hand toward the door. "All my life I've wanted to be a great author. You fellows are going to tell me what to write!"

The green men shifted several feet nearer to him. "Crime, weird, mystery, adventure, or romance?" said the nearest gnome.

"Fantasy," said the doctor, "Let's go!"

★ *Radiation In Space* ★

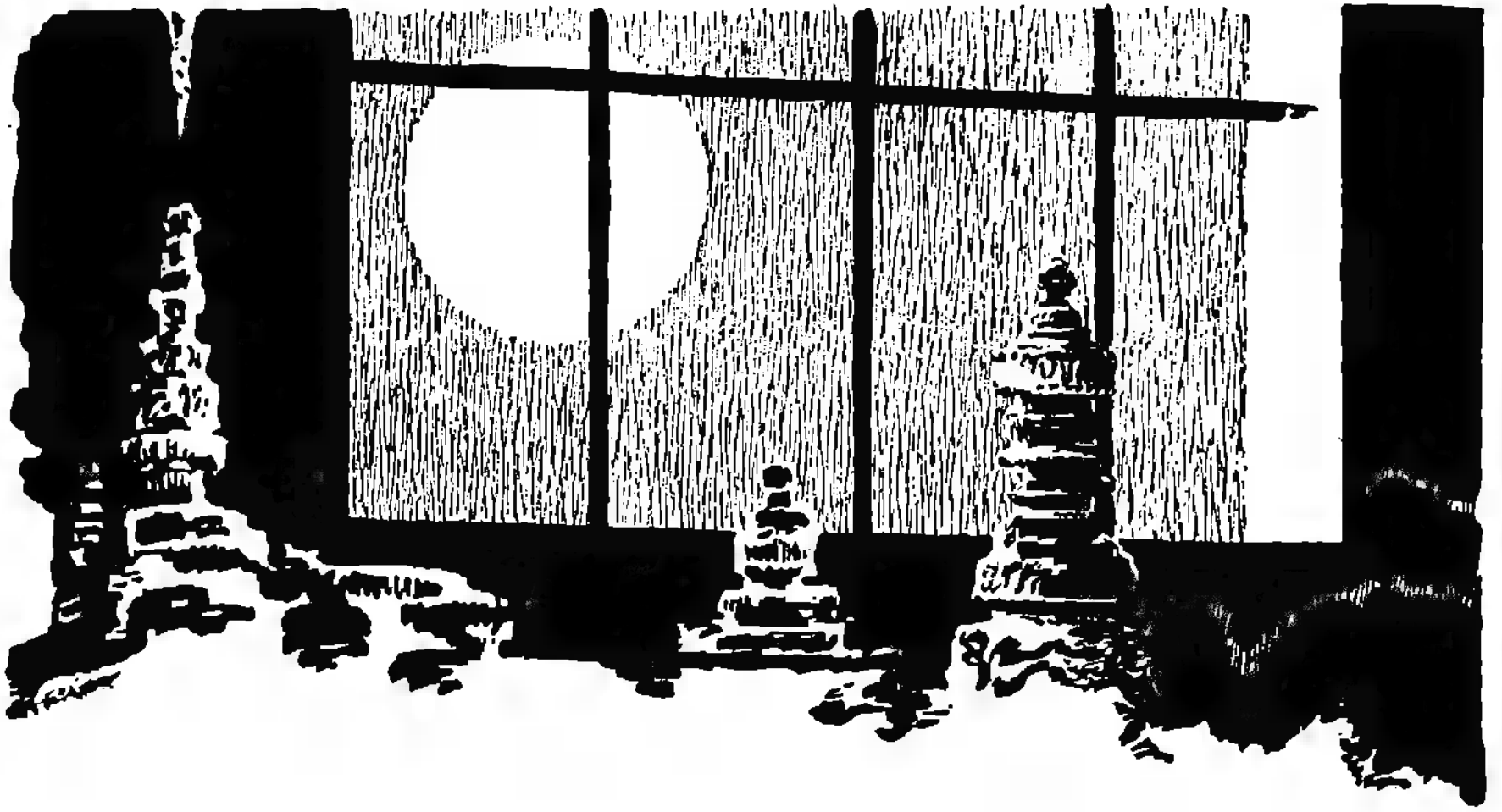
COSMIC rays are not very different in their lethal effects on the human body than atomic radiations here on Earth. In light of this knowledge the medical men who are preparing for the time when men will go into space realize that men will be able to endure space-flight for a considerable time.

The intensity of cosmic radiation has been measured at very great altitudes; essentially the same conditions obtained in outer space. The radiation amounts to about twenty-five times the strength of the weekly dose which can be taken here on

Earth by the human body.

Thus it appears that men will be able to withstand space-flights of fairly short duration. Since it is impossible to put heavy steel shields on a rocket, some other means of shielding will have to be found in order to enable long trips to Mars or Venus.

You can't send men into blasting radiation fields without getting back strangely burned and injured bodies. A good deal of hope for the solution of this problem lies in the development of light plastic filters capable of absorbing cosmic radiation.



TOMORROW THE WORLD!

By

Geoff St. Reynard

Can the past affect the future? What if you remembered to the dawn of time when you hated man and decided to destroy him — today!

It was like a cave, a great vaulted cave which echoed back my first hesitant movements on the slab and tossed them from wall to wall until the darkness about me was all one vast rustling. I felt my skin prickle into gooseflesh. In that moment of waking I was oddly frightened. I had no memory of location. I might have been in a subterranean grotto, with enormous stalag-

mites of supergrotesque shape rising all about me in the thick gloom.

I sat up. The slab was cold beneath me. Directly in front of it towered a thing like a nightmare skeleton of stone.

It was just that: the fossil of a duckbilled dinosaur. I had gone to sleep on a marble bench in the palaeontology room of the museum.

I laughed. The panic that had



touched me was gone, and I felt ashamed of myself. Not for falling asleep, because I had been very tired; but ashamed of the fear.

Lord knew how long I had slept. It was black night without and within, and no sound save that of my own movements came to me. The museum must have been closed for hours. The guards had missed me on my bench behind the dinosaur. I

stood and shook myself and smoothed the rumpled suit, and began to grope my way between exhibits toward the entrance hall. I left the reptilian skeletons behind—not without a certain relief, for they were awesome sleepers to pass among — and was striding down a dim pathway between glass cases when I heard the footsteps.

A watchman was coming toward

me. I could see the reflection of his flashlight. I halted indecisively, growled at myself, and went on. I had a perfectly valid excuse for being there. They could hardly do anything to me.

The guard was big, about my size, and his flash jumped in his hand when he saw me. Then he hurried forward. I grinned into the glare.

"Sorry to scare you—"

"What the hell you doing here, bud?"

I did not like him in the least. "I fell asleep in the bone room. Just woke up."

"That's what they say, bud, that's what they say." He was breathing in my face. I do not care for second-hand hamburger with onions. "Who are you?"

"Bill Cuff, I write for the adventure mags, maybe you've seen my yarns."

"No, I ain't. How come you fell asleep, bud?"

"Cuff," I said, "Bill Cuff. I was knocked out. I mean I was tired. Been working nights on a piece that doesn't want to jell."

"That's what they say, bud." I was getting good and sick of that line. Three times was more than enough. He didn't think so. "That's what they say. Fell asleep, huh? In a room full o' jewelry that'd bring a nice price even if you melted it down. Relics. We got a brooch over there that Napoleon gave to Catherine of Aragon. Make a nice haul by itself."

"I dare say, especially as she died some centuries before he was born. A unique bit of trinketry indeed." I disliked this guard more with each word. "You knucklehead," I said, "I told you I fell asleep. I was looking for a watchman just now."

"That's what they say. You come on with me. We got to see a cop, bud."

"For the love of—I can identify myself. Here's my driver's license."

"Stole, probably. We've had sneak-thieves in here before. You come on with me, bud."

I counted ten. "Cuff, Bill Cuff." His stupidity, his dark stolid bulk behind the persistent flashlight were angering me. "All right, let's see a cop."

He gripped my arm. "I don't like to be touched and handled," I said. I knocked his hand off. "Here, here," he yelped, "don't get tough or I'll have to rough you up a little."

He clutched my arm again. A scarlet curtain of rage shut down over my senses. I reached out and took his throat between my hands, dragged him to my chest, tightened my fingers and pressed and twisted till his flashlight dropped to the stone floor and went out with a pitiful tinkle. There in the unbroken dark of the deserted museum I held him until he was dead, until his head was turned over his shoulder and his popping eyes stared sightlessly down his backbone. Then I threw him into a case of snuff boxes, and went on to the entrance and let my-

self out and walked away down the moonlit street

CHAPTER II

FOR a long while I walked alone with my cold rage. It was well, most curious is a mild way to describe it. I had never been a man of violence and fury. Only in my adventure yarns had I spread gore and destruction abroad. I thought back over my twenty-eight years of life. I didn't believe I had ever even hit anyone before tonight. Yet I had taken enormous pleasure in the wanton brutality. Even after my anger had died, I felt no regret whatever for the murder of the guard. He had been a stupid *man*.

I found myself wondering about that after I had said it half-aloud. I didn't know why I had put the emphasis on *man*. You might have thought I was a woman.

Going aimlessly up one street and down another, now staring ahead and now gazing up at the full moon riding in its field of India-ink sky, I eventually saw that I was near the museum again. Some obscure curiosity took me past its doors. Just as I passed them, craning my neck foolishly as though I could see through their oak and bronze, half a dozen men burst out into the street. Automatically I speeded my pace. Then they yelled, and were after me. I ran.

What smirking fate had pushed

me back to the damned place? From my position on the sidewalk, my attitude of looking intently at the doors, my haste thereafter, they had leaped to the thought that I had just emerged from the museum. I thought of fingerprints, of all kinds of clues I might have left behind. I ran like a spooked steer.

Reason left me. I caught the last wisp of a fleeting amazement: could this murderous, panicky creature be Bill Cuff, hitherto a sane and sober pulp writer?

I turned a corner, vaulted over a hedge and flung myself prone behind it. The pursuers—museum guards, for evidently the police had not arrived—pounded by, yelling to each other. When they had gone I darted over to the building that shadowed this plot of earth, kicked in a window, knocked away shards of glass from the frame and let myself down into the basement of the museum. Swiftly I blundered my way between work-benches and unfinished exhibits until I had found the door. Down a long black hall I padded, snorting through my nose and peering back frequently. Like a beast, said a tiny voice in the depths of my brain; like a stalked beast.

I found a door, steps that led upward. I passed the first floor and then the second. My shins were barked, my nose bled from a smack against an unseen wall. I licked the blood off my lips. The stairs ended

and I was on the third floor. Here the moon slanted its cool rays into the windows, unhampered by nearby buildings. I could see quite well. My feet seemed to know where they were going. I passed through the hall of mammals, glancing aside at the dusty elephants, the two giraffes in their great cage of glass, the family of sea lions frozen forever in attitudes of stuffy majesty. My leather heels tapped loudly in the thick silence. I bent and took off my shoes, stuffing them into the pockets of my coat. Then I came to the central well, and leaning over the balcony I looked down at the hall of dinosaurs. Their bizarre frames were jagged splotches of black in a lesser blackness. Then the lights went up on their floor, and as I, two stories above, drew back my head with an involuntary snarl, guards hurried across the floor between the fossils, calling back and forth. I heard them say something about the broken window. I had trapped myself. I did not consider that important. Something in me knew I was heading for sanctuary.

I thrust my head over the railing again, like a fox on a cliff regarding a pack of hounds at fault. Chance made one of the hounds peer upward. There was a loud shout from below as the guard saw me.

Dashing along the passage between rail and wall, I entered the art gallery, traversed it, and came to the geology hall. Here was a replica of a Pennsylvania cavern, through

which visitors could wander to gawk at stalactites and artificial springs and plaster-and-plastic underworld creatures — dead-white salamanders, strange little blind bugs, crawling unnamed worms stuck to the synthetic rock with hidden adhesives. I dived through the mouth of this weird exhibit, bruising myself heedlessly; rounded heaps of faked stone, scraped skin off my knuckles as I fended off obstacles that seemed to hurl themselves at me in the murk, at last came to the back of the cave and turned and squatted there on my hams, fingertips trailing against the cool hardness of the sham rock floor.

The moon was dropping; now it looked in a window opposite the cave, finding its way between the icicle forms of stalactites, just grazing my dark blue suit here and there. I bent my head and stared at the ivory huntress of the skies. Her full round belly was gravid with portent. I felt that all sorts of shattering events were shaping within her, that something alien and terrible and withal glorious was about to be born.

CHAPTER III

I COULD hear no sounds of pursuit as yet. I thought back over the past half hour. I still experienced no shred of remorse. The man had deserved to die. He had laid hands on me without provocation. He had been stupid. He had been a *man*.

Again that odd emphasis stirred

a wonder in my mind, which vanished before I could grip it. I looked about me at what I could discern of the artificial cavern. I felt at home here. Then my memory played me a trick. I thought I had been in this place before, with others of my kind (my kind? what the hell?), and we had squatted thus and hearkened to the hunting cries of great carnivores and of — I grasped too quickly and too consciously for the rest of the thought and it was gone. But I could have sworn that I was going to remember the blood-roaring of a band of men.

What the hell, indeed! Had my wild adventure tales got under my skin and turned me lunatic?

That idea lasted for about a breath and a half. I knew I was cold sane. So, coldly and sanely, I groped in my memory for whatever experience I had turned up a fragment of. It was dim but it was certainly there, a scene painted in faded oils on dark canvas. I was in a cave with others of my kind, hulking broad-chested shapes in the gloom, and outside rose the howling of our pursuers. I felt the hair bristle on my neck and my forehead creased with rage. Then the lights went on in the geology hall, dispelling the picture.

I curled myself down behind the biggest of the stalagmites. I was wholly in shadow. I lay perfectly still, and my heart slowed its beat so that the blood hissed more quietly in my ears and I could hear

with wonderful clarity. Guards spoke nearby. They were searching for me, checking methodically through every cranny of the hall. I flexed my fingers. A silent chuckle shook me.

One came cautiously to the entrance of the cave and bent and stared futilely. I saw him glance around for his companions, then advance slowly into the place. When he was nearly above me I rose as swiftly as a panther. He had no time to drag in breath for a yell. I clamped his mouth tight with one hand, broke his neck with the other. It was done beautifully. In that moment I found pride in my perfect coordination, in my excellence as a killing machine as deadly as a king cobra. I laid him down in shadow. I traded my coat for his uniform jacket, which was too snug in the shoulders but fitted well enough otherwise. I put on my shoes and his visored cap and walked out of the cave. I went along the aisle, face averted from the other guards, and found a stair well and slipped into it.

Up went the hue and cry before I was halfway down!

I leaped to the second floor entrance, feeling their eyes already on my back as I passed through it, and went loping for the nearest window, a tall square of moontouched glittering. I hurled the thing open, swung onto the sill, and launched myself into space without even looking at the ground. It rushed up at me. As naturally as a cat might have done it, I landed on toes and fingers. Then

I was running.

No shouts broke out behind me. They had not seen my leap. I shed the jacket and cap as I ran. Then I remembered my coat, lying across the dead guard. No identification there—until they had time to check dry-cleaner's marks. I had an hour or two at least.

I headed for my hotel, a dingy, half-respectable pile on the edge of the downtown district. An hour to pack, and I would be on my way. There was something, or someone, calling to me from a great distance. I did not know what it was nor where.

My instincts would carry me to it. I wasted no time in wondering. I let my mind slip out of gear, put my whole energy into my traveling.

When I had run far enough, I found an owl cab and let it carry me the rest of the distance. It seemed oddly alien to me to trust to anything but my own powerful legs; but I forced myself to sit back and let the civilized habits of Bill Cuff take the upper hand. *I* would rest for a little while.

CHAPTER IV

AS I stuffed things into my big battered Gladstone I found myself changing.

A cryptic statement, that, and one which requires explanation; yet how can I say just what it was like, this metamorphosis? At first I was the same creature that had crouched be-

hind the false stalagmite and slain the guard, then had leaped from the second-story window to flee into the night. This was a—I was about to say a wholly physical being. That isn't true. There was brainwork of a sort behind its actions, but an alien brainwork. Could you understand the thoughts of an ape? Could you describe them if you did?

At any rate, I slid away from this physical being, imperceptibly, until Bill Cuff the prosaic pulpster seemed in the ascendant. Touching familiar things: my typewriter, sport shirts, cigarette lighter, a stack of manuscript—appeared to bring me back to what had all my life been normality

Yet this creates the portrait of a sort of Jekyll-Hyde personality, an extreme example of schizophrenia. I would not have you believe this for a moment. I was not two souls warring in a single body, nor a lunatic of any sort.

No. I was not two people. I was a sleeper who had awakened in a manner not explained, not understood, but acceptable at once as quite natural. I found myself in a body which I had already been occupying for twenty-eight years and two months and seven days. There was no other personality in this body with me. The body was mine. The mind therein, fully developed along its own lines, was my mind.

The body and mind were mine, but the *I*—the older *I*—which had

wakened was of somewhat different stuff. It had taken the body and mind (perhaps while I slept on the marble bench, perhaps during the brief argument with the guard), merging with them and dominating them. Yet the dual brain, the single body with new proclivities, were one, were all Bill Cuff. They differed but they were one.

I have said that before this night I had never even struck anyone. Yet there had always been the possibility that I might; might strike and slay, go berserk as I had now done. I had written many tales of brutal violence. Without my knowledge, there had been the seeds of savagery within me. They had flowered.

I looked in the mirror. I saw a well-set-up young fellow, a little broader than average for my six feet, heavy-boned, not much excess fat. My face was broad too, with high cheekbones and a small mustache and wide gray eyes, under an unruly thatch of thick black hair. I had a rather unintellectual look for a writer; it had always annoyed me. But I didn't look brutal. I had a sort of mild-mannered air, like a wider Jimmy Stewart.

IN all that night I never questioned anything for more than a second or two until I came to pack my belongings. Then the lifelong habits and prejudices came back to make me ask myself for an accounting. No remorse, nor fear, nor any such

weak emotions; simply curiosity at the changes.

What is it, I asked myself; reincarnation?

That would explain many things, including the paradox of two individuals in one—who were not two, had never been two, yet were different.

Postulate a gorilla, reborn in a man. His racial memories come to life after a certain period of time. He is still a man, has the reasoning ability of a man, is thoroughly *Homo sapien* in everything, except that suddenly he can swing through the trees and can think in a manner strange to man—a furtive, sly, cunning, beastly way, if you like, but a way that will help to preserve him even in the stone jungles of man.

As I said this to myself, I caught at one phrase therein. *Swing through the trees*

It was obvious that my physical powers had undergone a terrific change. I did not remember my hands ever being so powerful before. Never, certainly, had my reflexes been so flawless. Why, take but one instance: my leap from the second floor of the museum. That leap yesterday would more than likely have cost me two fractured ankles.

Superstitiously I looked in the mirror again and felt my muscles. Had they grown overnight, bulging out into the great biceps of whatever primitive entity had emerged within me? So far as I could tell, they

were just my old muscles—not bad for a writer, because I swam a lot and did calisthenics regularly, but surely no marvels as muscles go. The change appeared to be in my use of them. Instinctively I could employ them in the most effective way. What could that be but a racial memory acting beneath the surface of the skin?

Other implausible explanations of the business occurred to me as I packed. I discarded them. Nothing seemed to fit except the abrupt return of a personality from eons ago, some great brute out of my lineage. That chimed with the curious recollection I had had in the cave, and with the accent I had several times put upon the word *man* to describe my enemies. A gorilla? I laughed to myself. An intriguing thought, indeed! I did not for a minute believe it. But what?

CHAPTER V

I CAUGHT the five A.M. train for another big city — never mind which. I had about two hundred dollars in my wallet, a fair selection of clothes and essentials in my Gladstone, and the portable typewriter in its beat-up case. For a while I was well enough provided for. I settled back in the reclining chair, watched the dawn come up beyond the windows of the train, and listened with half an ear to the whispering voice that was calling to me from the un-

known.

An hour passed. I was drowsing. comfortably, my eyes shut. Then in an instant I was wide awake. Someone was watching me. I felt their gaze through my eyelids. As though moving in my sleep I turned myself around, opened my eyes the merest slit. It was the girl across the aisle. I observed her carefully. She was a pretty blonde, and yesterday's Bill Cuff would have been flattered to find her regarding him. Not I! A steady regard was a menacing thing.

I made sure she was alone. Then I opened my eyes wide and said, "Do I know you?" It flustered her. She turned pink and said confusedly, "I—I don't think so!"

I had one of those singular picture-thoughts, that seemed to come and go unbidden in my mind. I saw another female of this girl's race, whom I had taken from her people. I had desired her deeply, and later had trusted her more than I should.

She had betrayed me to her kin, and I had died.

For a moment I considered killing this woman. There were too many men all about us; I should have to flee instead. I stood up, gathered my Gladstone and typewriter, gave her a long hard look, and went forward to the next coach. She must have been completely baffled.

After a few minutes I grew restless. I was enclosed by the walls of this conveyance, and vulnerable to

attack. We came into a small city. The train left it, moving slowly. I suppose it was waiting for another train some distance ahead to be shunted off its track. I could stand the confinement no longer. I put my machine under my left arm, took the Gladstone in my left hand. (Always leave one hand free for emergencies.) I went out to the platform between the cars. A conductor was standing there counting tickets.

"Shouldn't change cars with all that luggage, sir," he said. "Train rocks a good deal and it's dangerous."

HE took a step toward me. I put up my hand to tear out his throat . . . and realized that he was simply going to pass by. I pressed against the wall. He went into the next car. I would have to watch myself. Needless killing at this stage of my flight would only complicate matters. I swung down to the last step, waited for a level stretch of cindery earth, and dropped off. The train was going perhaps twenty-five miles an hour. I lit as easily, as safely as a leopard bounding from a tree. I began to think there was nothing I could not accomplish in the way of strength and agility.

I walked back into the small city. Instinctively I sought the lower districts—not Skid Row, but the tenements and cheap hotels of the poor. I took a room in one of the latter. I barricaded the door and put up a

makeshift burglar alarm on the window sill: a couple of glasses, a water pitcher, other objects, all perched precariously on the edge so that nothing could come in without knocking them off and rousing me. Then I crawled into bed and slept for twelve hours.

In the evening I had a meal and the papers sent up to me. I read them while I chewed on leathery steak coated with half-congealed grease, and tiny potatoes as appetizing as the boiled eyes of iguanas.

The papers had it all. My name, life story, photos, even a list of the magazines for which I had written. Brutal Slayings Writer on Rampage Have You Seen This Man
all the rest of the trite screamers.

Then I came to the local paper. It was thought I might be here. It was thought that the man who acted so strangely on the west-bound train that morning, and who vanished at ■ point several miles out of town, might have been Cuff the Murderer. Descriptions tallied. Tentative identification had been made from telephotos. My lip lifted in a silent snarl. The hounds were baying close.

I dressed and shaved off my mustache. I put on dark glasses and went out to a bar. The liquor tasted like water from a goldfish bowl. I walked the streets. About midnight a policeman gave me a second look, then called questioningly. I waited until he came to me, and then with

savage glee I put him across my knee and broke his back.

I went to the hotel and stored up some more sleep, like an animal, preparing for the time when I should be fleeing or fighting around the clock.

CHAPTER VI

IT was some two hours before sunrise. I was dressing, packing leisurely. There was a knock at the door.

My light was on. I could not pretend to be asleep. "What is it?"

"Police sir. We're checking for a wanted man. Will you open up, please?"

I threw the last of my stuff into the Gladstone and shoved it under the bed. Putting my ear to the panel of the door, I listened for their breathing. There were two of them, and probably more within call, checking other rooms where a single man was registered. I tipped the shade of the lamp so that my face would be in shadow, and opened the door. They walked in, one of them diffident, the other as insolent as a thug, with his hand on his holstered revolver.

The second would be the less dangerous, I thought; he would be faster to draw that gun but more stupid in his reactions to a surprise than the other, who looked the more intelligent. So as they entered, turning to face me, I pushed the door

shut with my heel and let the smart, shy one have a quick jab on the angle of his jaw to quiet him for a time. That left me the tough boy, and I looked forward to a good time with him.

He was fast on the draw. His gun was not buttoned down and it fairly flew out to cover me. I am big and make a fine target. His eyes were squinting at my chest where he expected to shoot me and he never saw my foot come off the floor. The gun exploded out of his broken hand and skidded across the room.

He was full of guts. He came at me with his one good hand and his knees and even his teeth. I did not want to be marked. I kept my face away from him and let him hit me twice in the stomach. Then I caught his wrist and flying-mared him over my shoulder. The crack of his skull against the wall was a burst of sharp sweet music. I grinned wide. Then I bent over the other policeman. I had hit him more scientifically than I had known. He wouldn't get up any more.

That made five.

Five murders! Five killings, using no weapons, just my hands, for five violent homicides!

I STOOD there in the center of that room, which I had made a gory shambles, and for the first (and last) time remorse touched me. I was Bill Cuff, law-abiding writer; if not exactly an altruistic dweller by

the side of the road and friend to man, at least I had always been a normally decent guy who would go to a lot of trouble to keep from hurting anybody. What had happened to me?

A voice inside me said, *But you are only killing men.*

Men? But I'm a man, damn it all!

No, you aren't.

What am I, an orangutan? I asked myself with heavy sarcasm.

No, not that. No more kin to ape than to man.

An extraterrestrial, then, descendant of a flying saucer pilot?

No, not that either.

I put my face in my hands. Oh for the love of God, what am I then? What am I?

I knew I wasn't a man and I didn't know what I was.

The thing that was me, that had lain dormant until twenty-six hours before, and then had waked and taken over its rightful inheritance which was my body and my mind, what *was* it?

I didn't know what it was. But I knew a few things about it. It had once crouched in a cave with others of its breed, to listen to the angry yelling of hunting men. It had once stolen a human she and mated with her, and been killed by her treachery. It was master to an incredible degree of its sense and muscular equipment, even of its heart, which it could slow at will, and of its breathing, which it could stop en-

tirely for fantastic periods of time.

It was rising in me now and it was I. Remorse died forever. Human traits and sentiments died that I could no longer remember ever harboring. I was I and though I did not yet know exactly what I was, I knew it was no fit of madness that had taken possession of me, no devil of the olden times to be driven out by exorcism, no second personality to land me in an asylum; but the soul that had come down through untold centuries hidden in my genes, traveling its recondite course through blood and flesh and brain matter until it woke again to conscious life in Bill Cuff in the early autumn of 1952.

The pictures I had seen thus far were racial memory, remembrance of a dawn world, and I knew there would be more of them. I would hold patience in my hands and wait till time brought full recall.

CHAPTER VII

I PULLED my Gladstone from below the bed, strapped and locked it. Then for a moment I stared at my typewriter. It was doubtful that I would ever use her again, and she'd make an extra burden which I could scarcely afford to carry with me. I hated the thought of someone else's fingers on her keys. I had loved that cranky, faithful old mill. I opened her case and raising the machine above my head brought her

face down onto a bedpost. Two crashes were plenty. They'd never repair my old girl now I put her gently on the bed.

"Sleep well, lady." I said, and was obscurely glad to find that my metamorphosed self could still be whimsically sentimental.

I brushed the water glasses off the window sill, threw up the sash and climbed onto the fire escape, Gladstone in hand. I took off my felt hat and skimmed it out and down; it fell in the middle of the alley where anyone would be sure to see it. Then I climbed upward until I reached the roof. They would suppose I had lost my hat while running away down the alley.

Leaving the fire escape, brushing its flaky rust from my palm, I walked across the flat roof. The moon, very low in the gray-black sky, showed me the age-battered forms of chimneys and ventilators, with a shack-like structure looming foursquare among them: the entrance to the hotel. I thought of waiting till the searchers hared off on my false trail, then leaving by this obvious route. No good; my face and build were becoming too well known. I looked about me, deciding what to do.

And it seemed to me that I was not on the roof of a dingy third-rate hotel in an American city, but somewhere entirely different

The cries of pursuers echoed in my brain. I was crouching amid tall

buttress-tops, gargoyle rainspouts, coned tower-peaks; ancient tiles were slippery beneath my feet. I was scrambling round the roof of a castle, or at least what seemed a massive and castle-like building. Peering over the edge of the gutter, I could make out the sheen of moon-silvered water lying far below, with tiny wind-ripples on its surface. A moat?

No weapons were in my hands. I was hunted by fierce enemies. Yet I was not afraid. I was only hideously angry. I longed to get at them, but there were too many. Just let them come three or four at a time, armed however they wished, and I would meet them. But no, they must needs draw their game in great packs of howling humanity. Humans! How I loathed them!

What was I? I was myself, Bill Cuff, some centuries before. My vision was strangely two-fold. I could see the sooty hotel chimneys and could realize where I stood, and at the same time I was again creeping round among the gables and towers of the medieval castle. I could hear the cries of my seekers. A word was repeated over and over until it stood out from all the hubbub.

Vampire vampire vampire.

I knew I was no such thing. The undead—a superstition.

But they *thought* me a vampire. I had slain and slain, brutally, and—yes, and lapped up blood from torn throats, hot and bubbling between

my lips. Was I a vampire? Were my kind the origin of that legend?

THE race-recollection died away. I heard the shouts of my twentieth century foeman, who had found the two dead policemen. I walked to the edge of the roof and gauged the distance to the next building, which was several feet lower than this one. There was a gap of no more than ten feet. I threw the suitcase across. Men appeared eighty feet below, running through the alley. I watched them, leaning fearlessly over the low parapet. Like single-minded hounds, they never looked up. I laughed and gathered myself and jumped across the yawning void, alighting easily on the next roof.

I was beginning to take a keen gratification in my agility. Even the lifting of my Gladstone, the feel of sentient muscles gliding over one another to apportion the work between them, gave me intense pleasure. Thus must an animal feel when he moves about his small enterprises, knowing his body will answer any call he cares to make upon it.

I crossed this roof and leaped again and crossed a third, and found myself overlooking a wide street. The sky was growing more gray than black, and the lamps were beginning to take on the futile appearance they have in the half-light of earliest dawn. I wanted to put plenty of distance between me and this city that was too aware of me within it. There

was a rickety ladder leading down the side to a fire escape. I descended it one-handed, jumped to the metal framework, trotted down to the street. Cars lined it, and the third I checked was unlocked. There are ways to start a car without the key. I hummed peacefully out of town. The sun found me driving along a broad straight highway between fields of shocked grain, singing a tuneless song. There was happiness in the song, and hatred; and I thought suddenly that I was happy because of the hatred, which I had found again after many years of ignorance and futility.

CHAPTER VIII

I STOPPED on the crest of a knoll and got out of the car. Off to the right lay the beginnings of a vast swampy tract of wilderness, green and steaming in the early morning air. I had never known of it before, had no idea of its name or nature, and yet I knew I had been heading for it ever since I left the museum. Somewhere in its somber depths I would find the voice that was calling to me.

I looked back the way I had come. I could see for miles. There was nothing moving on the road but I had the feeling that pursuit was on its way; there was a prickling at the nape of my neck that could not be denied. Getting into the car again, I ran it to the edge of the knoll op-

posite to the marsh. Stepping out, dragging my Gladstone after me, I put my shoulder to the car's side and shoved it over. It hurtled down and crashed into a tree at the bottom. Far beyond it, still shrouded in the morning mists, was a town. My followers might presume I had made for it. A primitive stratagem, the car, like the hat in the alley—primitive, but perhaps effective.

It was wonderful in the swamp. A cool, damp efflux of greenness emanated from the soggy earth, the watery pools and stretches of quagmire, the moss-dripping trees and hummocks of sharp-speared coarse grass. I hung my coat over my arm, swung along lithely, reveling in the *green* feel of things and in my own new-found brawn that made the heavy Gladstone a feather in my hand. Unerringly my feet chose the swiftest, safest path. I was a beast, with the simple pleasures of a beast, hunted or not. And always before me sounded the strange and powerful calling that drew me on and on, a far-wandering wolf returning to his all-but-forgotten lair.

I had been in the marshland for about half an hour when I heard the dogs. So far away as to be little more than a whisper in the brain, their baying chilled my happiness in an instant. Dogs were old implacable enemies

I was running through a fen. Miry bog sucked at my naked feet, stale-smelling sweat covered me, my face

was lashed by the thorned branches of a legion of trees that sprang from the rich muck of the morass. Hounds gave tongue in a continuous chorus of hate, seemingly all about me. I ran and ran. Now I could hear the thick shouts of men, in a language that was foreign to me, though it had almost as many gutturals and slurrings as my own speech.

I was of a very ancient race in these parts (wherever they were). My people were classed as vermin, along with the dire wolf and the gray ape and the last surviving remnants of the hyena tribe. Man hunted us with his dogs, great vicious brutes with saber fangs.

I BURST through a screen of hanging moss and fell into a spongy patch of swamp. I struggled, miring myself worse than ever. Then the dogs were upon me, screeching their delight. Men followed them and ringed the quagmire. Great satisfaction was on their faces as the boldest of the dogs leaped forward to gash my upthrown arm.

"Haah," exulted their leader, and spat at me. "*Pict* ."

I shook away the horrible and haunting remembrance. I heard the hounds of the twentieth century, perhaps a little closer than before.

So I had been a Pict! One of the aboriginal British men (or manlike beings) who are supposed eventually to have bred and merged with Aryan invaders and thereafter with

the Scots. Was this the most ancient of my racial memories—or were they recollections of former incarnations of myself, my own individual soul? Whichever they were, and I knew they were one or the other, was this the eldest of them? Or would my waxing memory bring forth still earlier pictures?

If the Picts were subhuman, or even utterly nonhuman, and their uncanny blood had come through the incredible cycle of the centuries to rise anew in my veins, wouldn't that explain my war with the genus homo?

Surely it would!

I dropped the suitcase for a moment, standing quiet to hear the dogs. Then I smacked fist into palm and laughed, a grim snarling bark of merriment. "Pict!" I said aloud. "Pict, by the gods!"

And then, ages after the Picts, the strain had risen again and my comrades and I had fought mankind in our bitter, blind, malignant fashion—to be superstitiously regarded as evil spirits, the undead of the vampire myth.

And, come to think of it, we were probably the origin of the grisly werewolf illusion, too.

My chest swelled with a strange elated arrogance. This was the reason I hated the humans, calling them *men* in the accents of loathing. I and my people were not of humanity; we were all those harried, despised and feared creatures in human or nearhuman form, all who had fled

down the years and turned at bay and torn the throats from our would-be butchers. Sometimes we must have mated with them, infusing our dark strain into their pale stock. But blood ran in our veins and thoughts coursed in our brains which were as alien to man as the blood and the thoughts of tigers. But it is a proud if lonely thing to be a tiger

CHAPTER IX

THE hounds bayed on my trail, and the voice in my head called me forward. I picked up the Gladstone and hastened on, following an invisible path between oozing stretches of swamp under great creeper-festooned oaks, never putting my feet on anything but firm ground. I seemed closer to the earth than I had ever been. It spoke to me, mystically, silently, and I knew where was footing and where was treacherous bog. Even so a fox traverses new territory and never makes a misstep.

I don't know how long I walked through the marshland. My thoughts were busy, my heart was light and at the same time full of my hereditary wrath, and always my ears were cocked for the sound of the dogs.

At last I realized that they were much closer. I was going fast, but my route must have been deduced and short-cuts taken, on the chance that the dogs could pick up my scent

again. I began to run. The rank hanging vegetation brushed my face, bringing a flash of that older hunting scene to mind.

Suddenly—and I use that well-worn word in its strongest sense, for never was anything more startlingly sudden—there was a man in the path.

I dropped the suitcase and sprang at him, reflexes acting without my conscious volition. My surprise was overwhelming when he avoided my leap with ease, and tripped me before I could turn. Then a number of bodies hit me and pinned me to the mossy earth. With a roar I flung them off, twisting and bounding to my feet. The first man stood near. I fainted and as he dodged I changed the direction of my grasp and caught him by one arm. Then he was above my head, held helpless by my right hand. I faced the others—three of them, there were—and rasped, "One move and he's dead." I wanted the respite of a second or two in which to plan an attack. These were strong and tricky foemen.

The man aloft wriggled. I was holding him by the back of the belt. I gave him a warning shake. "Lie quiet, little man," I said, "or I'll chuck you into the ooze."

The three moved forward uncertainly. "Wait," he said to them, his voice calm. Then he chuckled. I admired his nerve. "Big fellow," he said to me, "how long since you ranged the fens and slew the up-

start Man?"

I set him on his feet. "I was right," I said. "The call wasn't in my mind alone."

He grinned at his friends. "Here is another who has the memory," said he.

I STARED at him. He was short, stocky, with a great shock of yellow hair sleeked down with oil. His eyes were living gray jewels in a tan face. His friends were nondescript, yet they held an odd resemblance to one another: all were broad of chest and vital-looking, and—I liked them.

"You're a rugged one," said the leader. "How long since you came awake?"

"About thirty-two hours."

They exchanged doubting glances. "I mean the first token you had that you were—different."

"Thirty-two hours."

"And you remember the fens? Are you sure?"

"I remember that I was a Pict. I was called a vampire and likely a werewolf. And I've had intimations that I go back even farther than those fens."

"My God," said yellow-hair half aloud. "Thirty-two hours! Did you get a swat on the skull, or was it natural?"

"I think I just woke out of a sleep with it. It took a while to percolate."

"Kill anybody?" he asked casually.

"Five men."

"The primal anger, yes. Five! Then you're Bill Cuff, of course. We've been hearing about you on the radio. Thought you might be one of the Old Companions."

"So that's what I am," I said.

"A name, only a name. We like the useless trappings of fraternity as well as *Homo sapiens* does."

"How far back do we go?"

"You'll know some day. Soon, if your progress thus far is a criterion. Better to remember by yourself." He shook his head. "You're a phenomenon. Do you know how long it took me to develop the memory? Seventeen years. And I am second leader here."

"Who's leader?"

"You'll meet him."

I clenched my hands, looked him up and down, and said, "Pict, wolf-man, or whatever, I tell you this. I take orders badly and I acknowledge no authority higher than myself." Anything less like the old Bill Cuff would have been hard to imagine, and yet I knew these things about myself and I spoke only the truth.

"Ah," he said, his jewel-gray eyes lighting, "you're a Tartar, all right. Goes with the swift progress, I suppose. We may have to tame you a little."

"Little man," I said gently, "you are welcome to try."

He jerked a thumb at my Gladstone. "Got anything worthwhile in there?"

"Just clothes and junk."

"Well, that's something. It would be hard to outfit an ox like you from our wardrobes. We don't generally run to height, you know." He said to one of the others, "Take it to the house, Trutch." The man (or I should say the reincarnated Pict) took it and disappeared down the trail. "Now we'll throw off your hunters. Many of them?"

"Hell, I don't know. Sounds like a lot of dogs."

He scratched his cheek. "Reinforcements," he said, and whistled a fluting call. Then he made a curious motion with his right hand. I knew that motion as well as his followers did. We stepped quietly in among the thick underbrush and, squatting down, waited.

CHAPTER X

THEY came along the pathway, holding in the leashed dogs, for evidently they did not trust to their own powers to keep up with free-running beasts. There were eight or ten men, with as many hounds. These were making a fearful racket. They nosed us and before they got abreast of us were poking wildly aside from the safety of the tussock-ed path of solid earth. The men yelled at each other and made the usual human amount of unnecessary uproar.

How I scorned and despised them! One carried a grotesque-looking

apparatus on his back which I supposed to be a kind of enlarged walkie-talkie. The germ of a plan grew. I marked this fellow for my own.

When they drew opposite I charged out of hiding with a savage bel-low. The dogs, not mankillers, were baffled for a moment, and the men were taken wholly by surprise. I gripped the front of the walkie-talkie operator's jacket and hit him in the belly; with the new adroitness lent my muscles by race memory, the punch had the force of a giraffe's kick. Ignoring the other men, I dragged him off to the side and laid him on his face among the lush weeds.

Others of the Old Companions were fighting with them now. None of us had weapons — indeed, they would only have hampered us and blunted our murder-lust. I heard the futile spat of a revolver over the barking and yelling. Two men came at me, drawing their guns. I reached out, laughing, and took them by the necks and smashed their heads together. My hands and forearms were spattered with blood and brains. I let the corpses fall and looked for other adversaries.

They were all dead, even the dogs. Seven of my brothers watched me expectantly, including the yellow-haired chief. I went over to the man whom I had hit in the belly.

"Can any of you work that instrument?"

They shook their heads. So I took

it off his back—it was held by shoulder straps—and rolled him over. I splashed green-slimed water in his face. After a while he blinked and gasped.

"How does this thing work?" I asked. He looked at me, then at the malevolent faces of the Old Companions. In a whispering croak he told me how to manipulate the transmitter.

"How many other parties are searching the swamp?"

"One."

"What's the leader's name?"

His eyes flickered for a minute. "Bill Jones," he said weakly. I doubled my fist and regarded his face. After a minute he said, "All right. It's Sam D'Peero."

"Where are they?"

"Took another trail. Off west, I think."

I killed him then. "Deep hole near here?" I asked yellow-hair.

He grinned, shouldered a corpse and picked up a dead hound by its collar. We followed him, myself dragging two men by the belts so as not to get any bloodier than I was. We found a big reeking boghole and threw them into it. Going back, we destroyed the signs of the battle. Then I picked up the walkie-talkie, switched it on.

"Sam!" I shouted, pitching my voice high and filling it with terror. "Sam, can you hear me? Oh, my God, we're trapped! The dogs run us into the swamp!" I waited a mo-

ment. heard someone say faintly and tinnily, "Johnny, what's the matter?"

"I—oh Lord, I'm sinking! I can't hold onto this branch much longer. Sam, Sam! I think the Cuff guy came and fell into this hole. You can't tell it ain't solid, and the dogs followed him and all the others—oh Sam, help me!"

"Explain, Johnny!" said the instrument. "What's wrong with the others?"

"I tell you we fell in, Sam! We were all bunched and this stuff's like quicksand. I'm — " I broke off, shrieked, gurgled horridly, and then picked up the walkie-talkie and heaved it deep into the swamp.

Yellow-hair laughed. "It might not put them off, but it'll confuse them no end. If you're worried about them finding the house, don't. A cross between a bloodhound and a private eye couldn't locate it. Come on." He patted my arm. "Let's go home."

CHAPTER XI

THE house was old but well-kept, upreared in the heart of the great green swampland. It was such a house as a troll might have built—a troll with a Gothic imagination. Rambling, with a ramshackle look despite its sturdiness, wood-turreted

"One of our more exotic headquarters," said yellow-hair, whose name was Skagarach. "Don't know what madman built it. We have them,

HQs that is, all over the world; but not many in so congenial a setting."

"Are we truly all over the world, then?"

"Most of it. Maybe not in deep Africa, nor in places like the South Seas, but wherever there're big enough colonies of so-called white men, we are there." There arose a faint barking, somewhere in the depths of the house. Skagarach shook his head as I snarled. "No, they're ours. We have dogs, of course. The friendship of the dog was not always limited to man. He was our servant too. And will be again."

"Who were we?"

He returned a question. "Do you know why you came here?"

"I was called. Something in my mind—"

"Yes. We're telepathic to a degree." He grinned. "Don't let it go to your head. It's a gift we share with the ants and the bees." We entered the house and I found a spacious living room furnished with big leather armchairs. "Have a drink," he said, pointing to a wall bar. "One worthwhile invention of our friend Man."

"No friend of mine," I said, and then, turning to him. "but why? Why this two-day reversal of my feelings? Why has this thing happened to me, Skagarach?"

"So quickly I don't know why it happened so quickly. As for the general *why* of it, it's blood and

bone and sinew and soul come down to us from the beings we once were. It's a powerful strain—so powerful that powerful is a weak word for it. I think it must be the strongest blood-strain that ever ran in animal veins. One drop, I think, would redden an ocean of milk."

"Animal," I repeated. One of the Old Companions put a tall drink in my hand and I nodded thanks. "I know this, but tell me again. We are *not* men, are we?"

HE looked into my eyes with those uncanny gray jewel-orbs. "No, we are not. At least not *Homo sapiens* pure and simple. I believe we began this hybrid race by stealing and mating with human women—" I recalled my long-ago death by treachery and agreed — "and then possibly the offspring of those unions mated among men. Certainly the Picts were not pure *us*. Then afterward the breed was watered again when the Picts bred to outlanders. Men always hated us, but women are strange creatures and—well, the unions must have been many. A mere handful that's accounted for by thefts of women couldn't have produced the mighty tide of anti-human passion which runs in us after so many centuries. Many millions must have our taint in them, though comparatively few have it so abundantly as you and I and these Old Companions. Note that I say 'comparatively'. Actually there are thou-

sands of us who recognize our essential difference."

"So now the old blood wakes in us," I said exultantly. "Why? After so long, why now? Are we like locusts, our knowledge lying hidden for an age and then bursting up in all of us at the same time?"

"A quaint notion," said Skagarrach. "No, we have always known, I think, in all the periods of history. But we never banded together before, never fought the ancient enemy as an army within its gates, as we are doing and will do with increasing potency."

"Why not?"

"Think, Cuff, only think! You are born in 1700; at a certain age you begin to know you are different. You hate the race of men. You have racial memories of living in caves, of being harried by men. What do you do? You never heard the name of—what we were and are. Science has told you nothing of prehistory. So where do you end?" He shrugged. "Bedlam. The lunatic dungeons. Fancy ladies come and giggle at you, the murderous madman, through the bars. You pine for fresh air and freedom, because freedom is even more precious to our race than to man. You die."

"Oh," I said, catching his meaning. "It's only in the last century that science has opened the door to the past, of course. Now we can realize what we are, and work accordingly."

"Yes, we can organize, can sheer off from the pack of humankind, and strengthen our race by inbreeding. We have children here and in the other HQs, born of two of us, who remember what they are before they can read and write. I said it was ■ powerful strain. Listen. I raise dogs. Once I bred a wolf to a shepherd. Five generations later a pup was born that was all wolf, every last ounce of him. Perfectly untameable little brute. We have that same tenacious blood-line, but to an almost incredible degree. In fact I think it is not so much blood with us as ■ strain in the mind. In us it has carried down through the uncountable years since prehistory. As that dog was no dog, but a true wolf, so we are not men, but—what we are." He broke off and looked at me appraisingly. "I have hopes for you," he said. "The tide runs high in you, Cuff. We will win back the world some day, we who are not of mankind. You should prove tremendously important to us."

I said, "Skagarach, *who are we?*"

"Hush," he said, "the Old Man is coming."

"Old Man?"

"The leader."

I turned and saw the Old Man, and I knew what we were. I had one final crashing burst of dawn memory, and I saw our beginnings and our whole long story and why we would always have to fight men. All this I saw in the Old Man's face.

That face was like a great terrible mask. The cheeks were broad, the brow low and ridged, the brain case enormous. The chin was shallow, with a wide thick-lipped mouth; and the eyes were glittering oblongs of gray mica-sprinkled flint. Gray hair covered the massive forward-thrusting head thickly, and tufts of it boiled up from the collar of the white shirt on the barrel-sized chest.

Skagarach came up to me and saw my knowledge in my face. "Yes," he said, "there is the true strain of our race; there is the result of inbreeding over a number of generations. The true he of our people."

I growled. "No truer than I, Skagarach. His are the features, but mine is the memory and the dawn brain."

He laughed. He seemed to find humor in everything. "I foresee strife," he said quietly. "You're a headstrong beast, Cuff. Never mind! We thrive on strife. Do you know now, who and what we are?"

"H. G. Wells called us the Grisly Folk "

"Yes, Cuff. You have it. We are the Neanderthals."

CHAPTER XII

NOW you who read this

I declare war on you and *all* your kind.

I tell you plain that we will rise and slay you, that there will be no quarter in this war which is to come

to you. Forget your hostilities between nation and nation—they have no importance compared with our crusade. Put by your silly fears of invasion from other worlds — your foe is here, has always been here, and is an enemy you cannot even recognize.

For we are banding against you and we can do that which will be the all-important factor in the waging and winning of this war: we can know each other, while you are blind.

Lest you object that the Old Companions are madmen, that there is no strain in mankind excepting that of man (and, if you are one of that foolish breed who misreads Darwin, of monkey), let me also tell you this:

Most scientists agree that *Ho-*

mo Neanderthalensis was no true man, but a kind of animal in man-like form, with several improvements and more specialized faculties than man.

We know this, for the first thing we remember, the first thing our children know, is that *we are not men*.

So watch for us.

Don't feel sheepish if you find yourself glancing back on the lonely road. Don't be self-conscious if you draw away from the silent man who sits next to you in the subway he may not be a man at all.

We are here all about you. Watch for us.

We will win back the earth from you who crushed us so long ago.

Watch for us! The future is ours!

THE END

“Hol” Mosquitoes

THE use of radioactive tracers, that is, the injection of small amounts of radioactive materials into a body so that it may be easily traced, is commonplace in medicine today. Doctors are learning a great deal about diseases that way. Engineers too are finding unique methods of measuring tiny amounts of materials worn away for example, by means of these tracers.

But the latest wrinkle, one which promises to give a tremendous assist in the field of biology and ecology, involves injecting radioactives into the bodies of flies, mosquitoes and numerous other insect pests.

Then by circling the surrounding area, carrying Geiger counters, researchers can easily locate the roaming insects, tagging them by the clicking of the Geigers. This immediately “puts the finger” on the errant insects and by carefully controlling conditions it is possible to trace exactly the paths of the disease breeders and carriers.

Hitherto it has been hard to tag very small things. With the use of radioactives it's easy. What this will mean in terms of freeing a world from diseases and insect pests, we can only guess at!

★ ★ ★



Conducted by Mari Wolf

THE other day I was down in the basement doing the washing when I suddenly began to wonder about something I'd always taken more or less for granted—the future. We write so glibly about it. We pick out so many alternative futures, everything from the world blowing up to supergalactic dictatorships to a sort of transposed Wild West of the Milky Way. But how often do we stop to wonder just what sort of world we and our descendants are actually going to live in?

Let's assume that some of our extrapolations will come true—that we're going to have space ships and colonies on Mars and mining stations in the asteroids and maybe even pirates hiding out on Jupiter's moons. What then? I'm not talking about the explorers or the colonizers or the scientists who may be trying to perfect an interstellar drive. Those are the dramatic people, the ones the stories are about.

I'm wondering about the great bulk of the people, the men and women and children who will still live

on Earth and maybe save up for one trip to the Moon during their whole lifetime. What will their lives be like? What will the future really mean to them?

I started thinking these thoughts because of the new washing machine in the apartment house basement. It's the modern kind of machine that does just about everything except sew on buttons. If I didn't know that it was just a very cleverly built gadget, I might think that it was alive. If I were a medieval philosopher suddenly transferred from my laboratory into the apartment house I'd probably think it was the work of the devil. I'd probably be willing to sell my soul in exchange for its dreadful secrets.

And yet, I'm a twentieth century housewife. I know that the washing machine is just that—a machine. I know that its only function is taking in dirty clothes and turning them out clean. I know that the different steps of its washing process are wholly automatic, built into it in the factory. I know that it doesn't think, doesn't say to itself, "I've

washed these sheets enough. It's time to start rinsing them. Click."

But if I were a fifteenth century housewife I might think it said exactly that, somewhere within the recesses of its fiendish intelligence. Because it does act as though it thought, in its own limited way. And it certainly says, "Click," often enough.

I watched it work, and I wondered what would happen if I should suddenly be transferred to some future century, say to the twenty-fifth. Suppose I arrived where some housewife was busy doing her chores—what would I think? What would I find? Maybe a robot maid? Maybe a completely automatic house?

I don't know. But I imagine that whatever I found, no matter how fantastic it seemed to me, it would be taken quite for granted by the housewife of the twenty-fifth-century. Just as much for granted as we take our washing machines.

Of course once I started thinking this way I just couldn't dump my clothes into the machine and then go off and leave them. I had to stay and watch the whole process. I tried to watch it from another viewpoint altogether — tried to imagine that I was really a fifteenth century peasant girl and that the basement was some weird freak of witchcraft into which I'd been flung. It was a strange experience.

I'd dumped the clothes in through the opening at the top. From then on there was nothing for me to do. The machine hummed. Water flowed into it. The soap I'd put in with the clothes melted and bubbled up into a frothy lather as the water rose. I leaned closer, studying the soap and the steaming water that poured in through the hose. I imagine that it looked—and smelled—a good deal different from fifteenth

century washing compounds.

The machine was full. The water shut off abruptly. The machine said, "Click," rather loudly, and then shook itself. The agitator started, the blades moving clockwise, then counter-clockwise, then clockwise again. The machine hummed, vibrating gently.

I was suddenly glad that I wasn't really a fifteenth century peasant girl.

For twelve minutes (the twentieth century Mari timed the process on her twentieth century watch) the agitator kept on agitating. Then the machine said, "Click," again, and shifted itself into its next function. The water drained away, sucked out through the hose connection that emptied into an adjoining laundry tub. When all the water was gone there was another click. The machine shook itself again, rather violently, and the entire cylindrical section that held the clothes began to spin.

It rotated slowly at first, then faster and faster until the colors of the clothes blurred together into a sort of gray and the rubber blades of the agitator looked as undefined and tenuous as the blades of a whirling fan.

The clothes then did a very strange thing. They climbed up off the floor of the machine and plastered themselves against the spinning sides. Of course the twentieth century Mari knew that it was merely the result of centrifugal force. But would the fifteenth century Mari realize that? Hardly. It would be witchcraft, like snake charming or the calling up of succubae, and surely it couldn't be anything but the blackest kind of magic.

The machine moved on through its appointed task, always with a sort of robot intelligence. It spun until no more water was sucked out of

the clothes, and then it stopped spinning and loosed more water into its cylindrical midsection and rinsed and then drained and spun again. It moved inexorably. There was no way I could have stopped the process—not if I'd been my fifteenth century self. Even the twentieth century Mari would have had a bit of trouble figuring out which electric cord to unplug from the wall socket.

The machine kept saying, "Click," and every time it did so it shifted into another operation. It was almost anticlimatic when it stopped. There was one last clicking and then the humming ceased abruptly and the vibration was gone and the spinning motion slowed down and then stopped too. The machine seemed to be asleep.

The clothes were still plastered up against the sides. The twentieth century Mari reached in and began peeling them off and sorting them into the pile that she would take upstairs and iron and the pile she would hang up to finish drying. I don't know what the fifteenth century Mari would have been doing. She would probably still be standing petrified, still reciting all sorts of cabalistic spells that might break the magic and let her go back to her own time. I guess maybe she succeeded, because the twentieth century Mari stopped thinking about her

Sure, you say, the whole idea was just my imagination. Washing machines aren't a bit magical. They're common, everyday affairs. I agree. Who but an advertising man ever waxes lyric over one? A washing machine is like any other machine. It's a tool, a labor saver, an inanimate object that may be a luxury or a so-called necessity. But whatever it is it's only something to be taken for granted as a part of our

cultural pattern.

Our cultural pattern. I think that's probably the key to the whole paradox. Something new comes out and we twentieth century human beings exclaim over it and say, "Whoever would have thought anyone would dream up *this*?" But then we buy it and use it and after a while it becomes just another part of our daily lives, something no more spectacular than an automobile, a telephone, an airplane, or a TV set.

Or a spaceship, matter transmitter, robot farmhand, or an interstellar telepathy amplifier

DO I hear you tell me to hold on a minute? I know. Those last things are certainly not common everyday gadgets. They're science fiction, pure extrapolation. Maybe they never will exist. Certainly some of them won't appear for a long time, if ever. But if they are invented someday, how do you think they'll be considered by the common, everyday people who use them? Fantastic? Marvelous? Or—just gadgets, like those antiquated twentieth century washing machines?

There was a science fiction article written back around 1900. Unfortunately I don't remember its name or its author. But it was a prophecy of the future, a fanciful prediction of how the world might be half a century later—in 1950. The author hadn't conceived of airplanes, but he had filled the sky with balloons and dirigibles and the streets with steam driven automobiles. He prophesied telephones too, but his were more advanced than those we actually have, for they included viewscreens so that you could see the person with whom you were talking.

He predicted so many other things with a really remarkable amount of accuracy. But in one aspect of his

prediction he was almost ridiculously wrong. For he said that his ideas were, after all, only fantasy, and quite incapable of ever coming to pass. He said that people couldn't live in such a world as the one he visualized without moving in a perpetual state of wonder, an unending awe before the marvels about them, a humble realization of how incredible their scientific achievements really were. The writer didn't believe that people could stand so much change, so many new things, such a state of awe as they would inevitably feel.

1950 has come and gone, and many of his predictions have come at least partially true. Many others have been surpassed by a great margin. But I haven't ever noticed anyone gazing in rapture at an electric light or a refrigerator. And the people who stare entranced at their television sets are usually watching something as unmechanical as the wrestling matches.

I rather believe that it will always be that way, no matter how wonderful the world becomes, no matter how many marvelous new things are invented. I'm sure that if I were suddenly transported into the twenty-fifth century, side by side with my great-great-greatest granddaughter, she'd only ask me rather brusquely to, "Step aside, please. The robot wants to dust there." And, "Where did you get those germs, anyway? You're putting such a strain on the purifying system."

Then I'd turn guiltily and see the house huffing and puffing its ventilators as it filtered the air, acting quite alive, perhaps, and even the robot would seem to be wearing a sneer on its mechanical face. It wouldn't do me any good to gape. After all, my greatest granddaughter wouldn't own anything except what every other civilized person of

that day owned. And she would be taking it all for granted, quite blithely, even as do you and I.

I guess I'd better come back to my own day and age and get to work reviewing fanzines!

First off, there's a letter from Jerry Watkins, 2561 Jones St., Omaha 5, Nebraska. He asks if I print birth announcements of new fan clubs. I sure do, Jerry and I hereby announce the birth of the Omaha Central High School S-F Club. Good luck, gang . . .

* * *

COSMAG; 25c; bimonthly; Ian T. Macauley, 57 E. Park Lane, N. E. Atlanta 5, Ga. How incredible! The very first story in the issue I'm looking at, Tom Covington's "Pioneer," tells the harrowing tale of a man of the future who is the first to try out a completely automatic house. What happens to him? Everything. And he ends in, of all places, the washing machine!

The other half of Cosmag is Henry Burwell's SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST. This issue the two were printed back to back, with whichever one you look at second upside-down. Turn it over, and the other one is topsy turvy. Quite ingenious.

* * *

ORB: 20c; Bob Johnson, Box 941, Greeley, Colorado; quarterly. The issue I'm reading now is a special issue, costing 25c and certainly surpassing in quality many of the other fanzines selling for that price. The artwork especially is superb, and the whole magazine is put out on fine quality slick paper.

It's quite a professional issue this time, with stories by Nelson Bond, Charles Dye and Katherine MacLean. A fine poem by Betsy Curtis too. But I still love best that lead story illustration of Dollens'.

* * *

GHUVNA: 10; quarterly; J. M.

Fillinger Jr., 148 Landon St., Buffalo 8, New York. Here's another brand new fanzine with a good balance of fiction, articles, and regular features, plus some poetry by Raymond Clancey. It's good for ■ first issue too, though the mimeoing is a bit spotty in places.

David English's story, "Corpse Ship," is just about the best in the issue. It's a gruesome little tale, what you might call fantasy-weird in a science fiction setting. All about dead men who come to life on a space ship.

I think you'll like Ghuvna. It's off to a *ghood* start!

* *

RAY BRADBURY REVIEW: 50c; William F. Nolan, 4458 56th. St., San Diego, Calif. If you're a Bradbury fan here's ■ magazine you shouldn't miss. Editor Nolan has gone to a tremendous amount of work in compiling and presenting this review, which really gives a comprehensive picture of Ray Bradbury's stories, his themes and his creative personality. I don't know what to single out especially. Anthony Boucher's article on Ray Bradbury the beginner, Henry Kuttner's analysis of Ray's themes, or the editor's compilation of the Bradbury Index.

There's a lot in this magazine that you'll want to keep and refer to later, if you're a Bradbury fan at all. I guess it's pretty obvious that I am.

ASMODEUS: 15c; quarterly; Alan H. Pesetsky, 1475 Townsend Ave., New York 52, NY. This fanzine contains a little of everything, and it's all interesting. For instance, this issue has an article titled, "Religion and Science," by Blinderman, a rather serious article which finally decides that naturalistic humanism is the best philosophy for man. There's also Bob Silverberg's

"Brief History of Fandom," which covers the years from 1953 to 1955. And there are many articles, stories and poems to give you a most varied evening's reading.

* * *

OOPSLA!: 10c; published every six weeks; Gregg Calkins, 630 Briarcliff Ave., Salt Lake City 16, Utah. Another new fanzine! And who has the lead article in it but my good friend and husband Rog Phillips! It's titled, "How to Publish a Fan Mag Zine and stay Sane." What does Rog know about staying sane? Oh well, it's ■ good article, and it gives a lot of valuable information on fanzine publishing.

There's also an autobiographical note by Lee Hoffman and a tale, "The Moon Garden," by editor Gregg. Mimeoing's a bit fuzzy, but that's the only complaint I have. You're off to a fine start, Oops!a!

* * *

THE LITTLE CORPUSCLE: 15c; published irregularly; TLMA, 408 West Bell St., Statesville, North Carolina. TLMA stands for *The Little Monsters of America*, who put out the Corpuscule together with the Napoleon Fantasy Club.

Most of this issue is devoted to another future history fable, this one on the evils of cross-breeding human racial strains. The world is divided into Mongrels and Thoroughbreds, and of course the Thoroughbreds are much better, purer, more intelligent, etc.

Sorry I can't stop fuming over it. What I'd like to do is send author Garwell a book on anthropology and let him get a few of his facts straight. But I doubt if it would have any effect at all.

Recommended only if you like prejudice with your fantasy.

* * *

IT: 15c; quarterly; Robert William Chambers, 990 N. 10th. St., Coos

Bay, Oregon. Chambers has a lot of fun spoofing science fiction, space opera variety. In fact, some of the take-offs he writes on that noble form of fantasy are twice as enjoyable as the originals. Others miss the boat, though. But all in all, his gentle tales of spacemen jetting down to rescue beautiful princesses with the odds sixty million to one in favor of the 'villains make very interesting reading.

IT isn't quite a one man fanzine, but it sometimes seems that way.

* * *

CONFUSION: 5c; Tommy Lee Tracy, 937 Florida Ave., Lynn Haven, Fla. Subscribe, demands Tracy. Let Confusion reign in your mailbox. It only costs 50c a dozen . . . Try it and see if you don't like a bit of wild Confusion. It's a zany fanzine at a bargain price, and it's filled with Shelby Vick's long-headed, lovable little people.

Walt Willis has a column about how to write a column. It's filled with scattered quotes, and is actually more fun to read if you just skip around. For example: writing a column is like throwing yourself off a cliff "Go forth and multiply," said Noah. "Can't," said the snakes. "We're adders."

Nothing to that? Wait for the punch line. Noah goes into the wood shed and finds hundreds of snakes. "Nothing to it," they tell him. "We found some logs in here and now we can multiply like anything."

If you don't get the point, ask Walt for a good math book. Shades of my *twigonometry*!

* * *

THE SAUCER REVIEW: E. Rockmore, P. O. Box 148, Wall Street Station, New York 5, NY. This is a specialized fanzine for those who are interested in flying saucer phenomena. Its chief object is to make

contact with any S-F readers who are collectors of saucer clippings, or who could collect them for the fanzine. The Review isn't for sale for cash. You can obtain it by lending the editor any 15 pre-1951 saucer clippings, by giving him any clippings (I couldn't make out the number) or by giving him any five 1951 clippings.

I think Rockmore is chiefly interested, though, in hearing from saucer fans. The whole review is a photostated collection of clippings from newspapers and magazines about the phenomena, and it would be of great interest to any enthusiasts. So if you're a saucer fan, contact the review.

* * *

PEON: bi-monthly; free copy on request; Charles Lee Riddle, P. O. Box 463, Church St. Station, New York 8, NY. The issue I'm reading has an excellent short story by Tom Covington. It's called "Master," and it's about a future in which a Martian's best friend is his man. Not a humorous story at all, but a logical extrapolation of the "We are property" idea into the "We may darn well become property" one.

Then there are fanzine reviews, movie reviews (from the rather jaundice-eyed viewpoint of a fan who likes his science fiction without man-eating vegetables, wicked scientists etc.) All in all, a good fanzine, as usual.

SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER: 20c; bimonthly; 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. Here is your Fantasy Advertiser, the same fine quality magazine but wearing a new name. The editor explains his reasons for the name change in parallel columns—one column for the old-time fan, the other for the newer reader of s-f. He does it very adroitly, too.

For the fan: ". . . It seems to me that if this magazine is to reach any significant portion of the s-f aware public, it must be identified as s-f. (Science fiction.) To most others, unlike to most fans, fantasy does not suggest s-f."

To non-fans the editor writes: "The traditional science fiction or fantasy 'fan' has frequently been an equally intent devotee of weird, supernatural, and, in fine, the full range of imaginative or off-trail fiction . . . And the term fantasy was selected and generally used in referring to the matrix of widely various stories read in common by the fans." So you can see that this pointed change in title is tantamount to a violation of a tradition."

Non-traditional or not, the ADVERTISER still contains fine book reviews and articles of general interest to the field. And, of course, it still carries on its main purpose—advertising. It's still the medium where you can buy or sell anything in the s-f and fantasy line.

*

OPERATION FANTAST: quarterly; 75; a year, by subscription only; U.S.A. representative, Philip J. Rasch, 567 Erskine Drive, Pacific Palisades, Calif. This is a fine fan magazine published in England by Capt. K. F. Slater. The Fantast, together with its companion the Operation Fantast Newsletter, gives to the reader a very good picture of British fan publications.

In this issue I'm reading, J. T. McIntosh has a rather depressing but very well written story entitled, "End of the Beginning." It's about the transference of a brain from a dying girl to a robot body, only the girl doesn't like it. She'd rather be a disembodied brain . . . I'm sure I'd hate being one, myself, but no accounting for tastes!

* * *

FANTASY COMMENTATOR: 30c; published irregularly; A. Langley Searles, 7 East 235th. St., New York 70, N.Y. This is a strictly non-fiction magazine which runs poetry in addition to articles dealing with various phases of fantasy literature. In the issue I have here the phases covered are very well balanced. George O. Smith has an article dealing with the space opera—its technique and variations. Sam Moskowitz has an appraisal of Stanley Weinbaum, and there's a poem of A. Merritt's "The Silver Birches," that I'd never run across before.

If you like the more literary type of fanzine, you'll like the Commentator.

*

THAT'S all the fanzines I have space for this time. There were twenty-eight of them in the BOX, and I couldn't possibly cover them all. Neither do I like to pick and choose, arbiting what I think you want to read. So, to those editors who sent in fanzines that didn't get reviewed this time, I'll get you in the next column. And when MADGE goes monthly I'll be able to cover the field completely—I hope. At the rate new fanzines are coming out though, I wonder!

If you have a fanzine, old-timer or brand-new, or if you have any announcements you'd like to make about science fiction clubs or activities, just write to the BOX. If you want some special activity mentioned you'll have to write ahead of time, I fear, but if you don't mind a bit of belated acknowledgment, write me!

The address is: Mari Wolf, c/o IMAGINATION, P.O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois.

See you next issue, everybody.

—Mari Wolf

OCTOBER ISSUE ON SALE AUGUST 14TH!

etters *from the* **eaders**

A STAR IS BORN!

Dear wlh:

A new star bursts into the science fiction heavens! I'm speaking of Dan Galouye, who is quite a writer; I hope to see much more of his work in the near future. TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! was powerful, smashing, and unique in concept.

FINAL EXAMINATION was also well handled. Who is Robert Sheckley? I don't recall seeing his work before.

Rog Phillips came up with a delightful tale too in the May issue. And THE DARK CAME OUT TO PLAY . . . helped give that balanced quality with the right touch of fantasy.

You know, today, when the newsstands are "loaded" with science fiction publications (most featuring mediocre material) it is good to see Madge maintaining the high position she holds. With me—Madge is tops!

Bobby Warner
Box 63
Bessmay, Texas

You will see a lot of Dan Galouye, Bob, rest assured. Like you, we think Dan is slightly more than terrific. As for author Sheckley,

that was his first published story, and a very good one too. You will note that Madge is discovering a great deal of top-flight talent . . .
wlh

GI FANS WELCOME

Dear Ed:

The Liverpool Science Fiction Society wishes to extend a welcome to all American fans stationed at the USAAF Base, Burton Wood, near Liverpool. Pass the word along for the boys to come over any Monday evening after 7 p.m. to 13A St. Vincent Street, Liverpool, England.

You folks over in the States have been so kind to us English readers of science & fantasy fiction, supplying us with books and magazines, that we'd like to take this way of showing our appreciation. And for all the fans in the States who can't drop in in person, write us a letter. Either way we'd like to know you better!

David S. Gardner
63, Island Road
Liverpool, 19.
Lancashire, England

The word's been passed, Dave, and we know you'll hear from many American stf fans.
wlh

HEY, HOLLYWOOD!

Dear Mr. Hamling,

Thought I'd get my two cents worth in and also offer my congratulations on your editorship of a great stf magazine.

Malcolm Smith's photo cover on the May issue was one of the best. The cover story—TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL!—egad! I can feel the room dissolving around me right now! That is one story that should be made into a movie!

Gordon Erickson

3812 Terrace

Kansas City, Mo.

We think you've got something there, Gordon. How about it, Hollywood? wlh

POWERFUL READING

Dear Ed:

Although I am not by any means a scientist, rather, one who appreciates science and more than that delights in literature of a fantastic nature, I was delighted to be able to purchase my first copy of IMAGINATION recently. That is, I was delighted until I started reading. In my typical manner I read the last story, DESTINY UNCERTAIN, first, and the first story, TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL!, last. What a beginning! What an ending! What an introduction to a magazine!

When I finished Phillips' story I felt most unusual. When I finished TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! I knew what the matter was. I was just plain scared! Somehow the combination of these two excellent gripping tales was a dose of powerful reading that was almost too much to take at one sitting. After two aspirin and some strong coffee I read the whole book again—and again. All I can say is IMAGINA-

TION is spellbinding, enchanting, and the best magazine I have ever read!

Jack Edward Blake

Station A, Box 232

Abilene, Texas

To borrow a cliché, "Stick with us, Jack, you ain't seen nothin' yet!" Speaking of powerful reading, wait until you read Geoff St. Reynard's great novel next issue, ARMAGEDDON, 1970! You'll find yourself watching the skies for weeks afterward wlh

A DOG-OPENER YET!

Dear Bill:

Re SURVIVORS in the May issue.

To use your own words—I am putting the "im" in front of "possible." To quote Bowron as he was telling Oluf: "I'm getting too old for the winters, and the canned foods are getting scarcer every year."

I say, old man, how can a dog hold ■ can opener with its paws?

Mickey Bones

1537 Haight St.

San Francisco, Cal.

You've got us there, Mickey, unless—yep, he must have done it with those canine jaws! wlh

A FORTUNE IN STF!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Speaking of letters, why must some people continually criticize or yell, "terrific!" Personally I read every stf magazine on the market and they are all pretty standard except for the odd outstanding issue. Of course there are some that are below the class of other mags but that is standard to them because they appeal to a different class of readers. You know, some people are really funny in their likes and dislikes. Why I know one fan who

stopped reading "Madge" just because it got that nickname! Now if that isn't silly I'd like to know what is! I like the name Madge and I'm sure most other readers do too.

As usual, I won't classify the stories because I enjoy every one. I don't think I've ever really disliked a story in Madge. One thing in particular I like about the magazine is you seem to get more stories in per issue than any other magazine. At least, that's the way it seems to me, so fans, don't bother proving me wrong with other statistics!

Also, let me state here that I think Daniel F. Galouye is one of the better authors it has been my good fortune to come across. Let's have more of him!

Here are a few points currently in my mind: 1. No serials. I'm in the middle of three right now and it's driving me crazy trying to make sense out of them! 2. I'm looking forward to monthly publication of Madge. 3. Might see you this summer. The wife and I are planning a long vacation trip. Would we be welcome?

I've just finished figuring the approximate cost of the stf magazines I buy every month. It amounts to \$4.00. Ye Gods! That's \$36.00 a year. For eight years that's \$288 not counting all the stf books I buy too! I guess I'll have to lock the stuff up in ■ vault. Now I know why I can't afford that new typewriter I've been wanting!

Al Rosen
4255 Maplewood Ave.
Montreal, Que.,
Canada

Hold on to your hat, Al. Do you realize that in a million years you'll have spent some \$36,000,000.00!

As to your long vacation trip, why not plan it to coincide with the World Science Fiction Convention

being held over the Labor Day Holidays in Chicago. (The Morrison Hotel.) That way you'll get to meet everybody in stf—fans, writers, editors, and artists. OK? wlh

HOODWINKED—PLEASANTLY!

Dear wlh:

I got a gripe. Your magazine. I feel that I have been deceived, taken in, cheated, cozened, swindled, victimized, betrayed, played false, hoodwinked, imposed upon, misled, led astray, and defrauded. In short, hypnotized by your advance publicity, I was expecting another UNKNOWN. In my present disenchanted state I realize how foolish that was. But I can dream, no?

Not that you don't have one of the best stf magazines in the field; you do. It's just that I was expecting that special off-trail atmosphere and didn't quite find it. I have read Madge from the first issue and have seen, sadly, more and more science fiction and less and less good fantasy.

Now I'd like to send a few comments Alan Fogal's way re his letter in the May issue. Friend Alan, despite your interest in science fiction I'm afraid you're not at all progress-minded. Where would we be now if no criticism of anything were ever voiced? Probably still swinging from a convenient limb, dressed in home-grown fur coats. It is criticism that leads to new developments.

As to creating new fans I sincerely believe that the only way is to take a copy of a good stf magazine (like Madge) and a pistol and point the latter at the prospect's head and force him to read the book from cover to cover. After that you could put the gun away—he's hooked, but good! Why do I advise this? Well, I've been trying to get my roommate to read science fiction for three

years and he only laughs. So what finally happens? I go home over the weekend—he runs out of reading material and is driven, through sheer boredom, to pick up one of my stf magazines and now he's begging for more!

Ralph P. Belsinger
Central State College
Wilberforce, Ohio

Put that pistol down, son, you just proved that the best way to catch your man is with the right bait within easy reach—science fiction! It never fails wlh

LETTER SECTION GRIPE

Dear Ed:

I am writing this letter not to make enemies or create ill will, but merely to offer some advice to all the fans who write frequent letters.

I think letter columns are greatly misused. I used to enjoy reading letters but recently I find little except "and this is how I rate the stories in the current issue," type. Now before all the fans start slamming into me I want everyone reading this letter to relax a minute and listen to what I have to say. Then you can write me a nasty letter if you so choose.

Answer this question in your own mind: do you really care what other people think of the stories you read? Isn't it true that if you like a story and all the rest of the readers thought it stunk that you would still say it was a good story? I read each story for my own pleasure, not as a critic whose job it is to review each story for all of fandom. We all like different aspects of the stf field and therefore do not agree on any story that appears in a magazine.

It seems to me that fans have more important or interesting things

to say. I hope they'll take my advice and help make the letter column more interesting again.

Ron D. Rentz
130 Vera St.

W. Hartford 7, Conn.

Come now, Ron, aren't you being a little extreme in your criticism? After all, the only way an editor can get an immediate reaction to the stories he publishes is through the letters from the readers. Now we're not advocating solely rating letters, but we do feel they belong in a letter column—along with letters on other subjects pertaining to science fiction. However, we'll leave the point up to our readers for further comment. wlh

SIGNIFICANT STORIES

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I have just finished reading the May issue of IMAGINATION. This is the first letter I have ever written to any magazine; the reason I'm writing now is because I feel your May issue deserves some compliments.

I read all books and magazines of science fiction that I can find, but the stories in Madge are about the finest obtainable.

I think THE STRANGER by Gordon R. Dickson deserves special mention. I read it three times and I still like it. I do hope you will use more stories of this type. I don't feel that human beings will be worthy of exploring other worlds until they put their own house in order; the Dickson story shows brotherly love to human and alien alike.

The other stories were, of course, all good. I would have preferred a different ending to FINAL EXAMINATION. The photo cover was very interesting.—No serials, please!

And Madge will be very welcome as a monthly magazine!

Anne X. Halonen
Box 153
South Porcupine, Ont.,
Canada

And your letters will always be very welcome, Anne. As to the ending on FINAL EXAMINATION, just what did you have in mind? We thought the ending Bob Sheckley provided was just right. You'll be seeing more stories by Gordon Dickson in coming issues. wlh

NO THUD AND BLUNDER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This letter may arrive a bit late, but then I'm quite a few thousand miles from the USA!

Madge is certainly a magazine of contrast. It is hard to see how one issue (March 1952) could contain a story so bad as DARK DESTINY and so readable as REBIRTH.

Yet, at first glance they seem to have quite a bit in common. Neither of the plots are particularly original—both are rather improbable. In each the heroine is threatened with a fate worse than death and rescued in the nick of time by the hero who battles successfully with the nasty villain—and each contains plenty of action and gore. It is in the style of writing that they are so different, and that makes all the difference.

Take REBIRTH for instance. It was hardly super-colossal but it was pleasant reading. Mr. Galouye has a nice easy, simple style, and he put across an entertaining and absorbing story without resorting to any of the cheap tricks of sensationalism found in DARK DESTINY. I look forward to reading Dan Galouye's novel in the May issue.

I'm afraid I've been slowly simmering over this kind of thing for a long time, and I suppose DARK DESTINY was the last straw. At

least it provided me with the opportunity to relieve some of my pent-up indignation. So please, Bill Hamling, how about a little more of the kind of story that makes Madge the magnificent masterpiece, rather than Madge the moronic monstrosity.

Pearle Appleford
75 Kensington Drive
Durban North,
Durban, South Africa

You're right about the different style of each story you mention, Pearle. And rest assured you'll find plenty of the type you like in Madge—and Dan Galouye will be writing plenty of them! But we try to please all our readers as best we can and the action adventure type story that Dwight Swain writes is popular with many readers. (Incidentally, Dwight can write the type of story you prefer too—just watch coming issues!) wlh

RED HOT—AND COOL!

Dear wlh:

I say old bean, what happened to your cover on the May issue? I agree with most of your readers that the cover for SPECIAL DELIVERY (January) was red hot. But this May cover was cool to the point of ice-cold! (Don't worry, the criticism tapers off there!) I like your magazine. It is on a par with GALAXY and ASTOUNDING, and I hope it always stays that way.

I would rate the stories in the May issue as: TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! darn good—more imagination than usual! Likewise, THE DARK CAME OUT TO PLAY

SURVIVORS was short and punchy, but not too original. THE STRANGER wasn't bad. The others weren't up to Madge's high standard. I too am against the "space-opera" type, hence, HIDEOUT left me relatively cold.

I would also like to reiterate the opinion of the majority—no serials, please!

Michael M. Munn
Barracks 6
Gambier, Ohio

Hey, Mike, you mean you didn't like the photo cover? We agree that Bill Terry's January cover was red hot, but Smith's May cover felt pretty warm to us too! (You'll have another terrific Terry cover next issue painted around Geoff St. Reynard's great novel, ARMAGEDDON, 1970! For a hint—watch out for Flying Saucers and an atomic explosion!) . . . wlh

PAGING MR. MILLER

Dear Ed:

I have just finished my first issue of IMAGINATION and must say that I am impressed. Until today my favorite magazines were ASTOUNDING and the new mag, IF. Now, however, Madge is very definitely "in the running!" I enjoyed every story in the May issue except THE DARK CAME OUT TO PLAY and SURVIVORS. The best yarn in the issue was DESTINY UNCERTAIN.

For the readers, I am interested in trading, buying, or borrowing science fiction. Anyone who wants to correspond, etc., will find me ready to reply.

By the way, my favorite writer is Walter M. Miller, Jr. Thanks for the enjoyment I received in reading Madge. I'll be waiting for more of the same.

Tony Barlow
227 Luther Drive
San Antonio 1, Texas

Welcome into the fold, Tony, and rest assured you'll receive a lot more enjoyment in future issues. Drop us a line again soon. wlh

PIN-UP COVERS!

Dear Ed:

Thank you very much for putting out such an amusing, entertaining, and educational magazine. I have enjoyed the last two issues a great deal. Thanks again!

Madge compares favorably with any other science fiction publication—and for my money there aren't enough! Your stories seem to be less serious in nature than some in other magazines, but they are very good and nonetheless enjoyable. Frankly, it is a pleasure to see fiction in a lighter vein.

The many features in Madge are also very nice. Through Mari Wolf's delightful column, FANDORA'S BOX, I got in touch with a fan club that I'm happy to be a member of. Also, don't ever drop your reader section—if anything make it larger!

There is one thing however, that disturbs me about Madge and other science fiction magazines. Your artwork is very good, and I often get the urge to cut it out and pin it in some prominent space. Most of your covers on Madge would make really better pin-up material than the type commonly accepted. But then I see, usually at the most prominent place in the painting, the title and author of the inside lead story. This, for me, spoils the whole idea of using the cover as pin-up material. Can't you do something about this? Many of the stf fans in the high school I attend agree with me on this.

Otherwise, you're doing a nice job.

George Stanley
1070 S. Holt Ave.
Los Angeles 35, Cal.

Entertainment's the one big commodity we're selling, George. We're happy to know you think Madge supplies it. As to the cover type question, that's a pretty tough edi-

torial problem. Like any other magazine (or product) the idea is to let people know what they're buying. Sure, we know the magazine itself infers science fiction, but in Madge's case (unlike many other stf publications) the cover always ties in with the lead story for the issue. We feel that including the title in the painting adds a certain dramatic touch—a good selling point, in other words. You will note, however, that Madge tries to get around this problem wherever possible, as in the January issue where the title was actually a part of the cover painting. There'll be more like this in the future. In the meantime, rest assured we'll try and keep type away from any important focal point of the cover *wlh*

REAL GEORGE, BY GOLLY!

Dear Ed:

On page 155 of the May IMAGINATION I read something that knocked me for a loop and into a state of happy delirium. You stated: "Madge will go monthly as soon as production difficulties are straightened out, etc." The thought that soon I'll be able to enjoy the best science fiction magazine on the market every month is a happy one indeed. Madge is the best, you know. If you doubt it take a look at your reader section; which reminds me, I like the letter column very much.

Unlike some readers, perhaps, I am a fanatic about stf. I carry a copy of Madge with me wherever I go—no fooling! Even to school—and I lose more IMAGINATION that way!

Speaking of being good, there's only one way to describe the May cover: superb—wonderful—superdynamic! Malcolm Smith is to be congratulated—not only for this

cover, but every one he does.

As for the magazine as a whole—you heard me before, it's the best!

Oh yes, no serials!

And one other thing I have to mention. Your editorials are real George! In words, wonderful!

Clayton Scroggin
Girard, La.

We think you're real George too!
And there'll be many more terrific
Smith covers. Watch for a new photo
job soon. It's dilly *wlh*

TOP 5 STF MAGAZINES

Dear Ed:

By reading your letter columns it can be plainly seen that people are dead set against serials in Madge. Well, I'm going to stick my neck out and say something for serials.

First of all, there are people who claim that interest is lost if a story comes in three parts. They are wrong—simply wait until you have all three parts before you read the story. Secondly, there is the objection that an issue will be missed. This is a good argument for people who do not get to stands on time for their current—but a subscriber to Madge would have nothing to worry about!

Another thing I'd like to argue about (especially with you, ed) is which science fiction magazine is the best. My first choice would be ASTOUNDING. Then, GALAXY; third, IMAGINATION; fourth, OTHER WORLDS; and fifth, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION.

Dick Field
2253 Commonwealth
St. Paul 8, Minn.

No argument, Dick, even though we are naturally slightly prejudiced in favor of Madge. At least you've got her ranked right at the top in a field

of some 25 or 30 magazines! That's a pretty big compliment anyway you look at it *wlh*

BEST ISSUE YET

Dear Ed:

Well, I've just finished reading the May issue of Madge and I just had to write and congratulate you on what I believe to be your best issue yet. The cover and inside illustration for TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! were terrific. Also, let's have more stf cartoons.

FINAL EXAMINATION was the best story in the issue, I thought. More stories by Robert Sheckley!

Second place goes to Dan Galouye's fine novel, TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! A well written story. SURVIVORS and THE STRANGER tie for third. The former had a tricky ending and the latter was reminiscent of the old ASTOUNDING. Fourth place goes to THE DARK CAME OUT TO PLAY . and fifth, HIDEOUT.

I did not like DESTINY UNCERTAIN. I didn't care for the theme in this story.

Lastly, is there anyone in deep-south Texas going to the Chicon? I'll go if I have company for the trip. Anyway, I'd like to correspond with any fans in the Rio Grande Valley, around or in San Antonio.

Flavio Trevino
623 E. Adams
Brownsville, Texas

We're sure some Texas fans will contact you—and we'll look forward to seeing you at the Convention. And that goes for all you readers. Make a point of getting to Chicago over the Labor Day weekend for the big World Science Fiction Convention at the famed Morrison Hotel. You'll have the time of your life! *wlh*

IT'S A GREAT DAY!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I've been reading science fiction for a couple of years now but this is the first time I've ever written a letter to a magazine. Madge is among my favorites and it's a great day when the new issue of Madge hits the newsstands.

I always thought letter columns were a great waste of space, but I read the letter section of Madge thoroughly for the first time last night and I rather enjoyed it. One thing in particular struck me; your replies at the end of each letter. They are really swell. You seem to be a very tactful and friendly person. I particularly like the way you handle criticisms—letting the readers write their own replies. Sorenson (in the January issue) really got what was coming to him—imagine calling Madge tripe!

I disagree entirely with Richard Green and his letter in the May issue. In the first place I thought LETTER TO THE EDITOR was a good story; in the second place I'm all for fantasy; and in the third place a magazine (like individuals) has to be conscious of its existence. It seems to me that Green had a rather flimsy basis for his criticism.

To you, ed, keep up the good work—you've got a fine magazine.

Barbara Edelman
2727 Dean Blvd.
Minneapolis, Minn.

Thanks for the compliments, Barbara, and write again soon. *wlh*

WORD FROM ENGLAND

Dear Bill:

A pal passed along a copy of the January issue of Madge. The magazine seems to be coming along very well. So well in fact that I'm enclosing a long term subscription!

Apart from considerations of quality, atmosphere, or "flavour" which make Madge individualistically your own baby, I heartily approve of the fact that you are both editor and publisher. That gives you the final say in every phase of Madge.

I certainly wish you every success and know that Madge will continue its fine performance.

H. Gomberg
Pearlworks
Alexandra Road
Lowestoft, Suffolk
England

We're happy to be editor and publisher of Madge too — and you're right, there's nobody to tell us how to run the magazine—except our readers! *wlh*

SETTING A NEW STANDARD

Dear Ed:

Your May issue was swell and right up to par. I always seem to know that I can depend on IMAGINATION to be tops, no matter how terrific an issue the other science fiction magazines put out. I guess that's the reason I subscribed to Madge!

Robert Sheckley and Rog Phillips captured honors for the May issue. I don't know what it was about Sheckley's FINAL EXAMINATION, but it had that certain something which impressed me. Maybe it was a little different in a different way

Rog Phillips always seems to be good or darn close to it.

Your lead novel TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! was good too, but I think Dan Galouye's story, REBIRTH, in a previous issue was a hundred and ten per cent better. I wonder if your readers will agree with me? But Galouye is good! Hold on to him by all means.

The cover. Ah, that cover! Madge has set an entirely new standard in the cover field. Congratulations! I'm

sort of an amateur photographer myself and your explanation of how the cover was made (in your editorial) set me aback. I believe that it won't be long before all magazines adopt your policy.

Claude Ray Hall
Box 611
Winters, Texas

Madge's photo covers have proven very popular, Claude, and indeed they have set a new standard in the field. You'll be seeing many more in the near future, of course . . . wlh

CALLING HAWAII

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I have been reading science fiction ever since I was 14, which was, ah-m, back in 1939 . . . how the years slip by! Yet this is my first letter to any magazine—nothing unusual I note by reading your letter section!

I've been a fan of Madge since its first issue. I didn't think I'd ever find a magazine to compare with AMAZING STORIES or FANTASTIC ADVENTURES but I have. I like IMAGINATION and can't find one single thing to complain about.

I've got a collection of stf magazines, and any fans who would care to read them can do so by supplying postage for return to me. Also, I'd like to write to some fans, and please . . . is there a fan in Hawaii who will write to me? I was born there and spent my early childhood there. I'd be very happy to find a fan there to correspond with.

Margery Salvage
31½ Mattie St.
Auburn, N.Y.

We're sure you'll hear from Madge readers in Hawaii soon, Marge . . . wlh

HAUNTED MAILBOX!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

After your March issue was read

FRUSTRATED?

MENTALLY tired? Lack energy? Tied by circumstances? **SNAP THE CHAINS THAN BIND YOU!** You can, with this proved **SUCCESS Plan**. And you can test it *free!*

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and re-read, I started to haunt the mailbox for the May issue. After some terrible days of waiting Madge showed up. (By the way, it wasn't bent!) I ran up the hill to the house and read the lead story, **TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL!**

Pardon my enthusiasm, but gosh—gee—wow! What a story! Then I read the other stories, and all I can say is, what an issue!

My sister has always been indifferent to stf, but Madge's covers and stories (and some stf books) are breaking down her resistance.

In closing, if Madge goes monthly please don't let it interfere with the quality of your wonderful magazine. Now I'm haunting the mailbox until the next issue!

John Walston
Vashon, Wash.

You'll never receive Madge folded or bent in the mails, John, unless your mailbox is too small. Reason being subscribers get their copies in special heavy envelopes — and of course, ahead of newsstand publication. So how about you other readers subscribing? Turn to page 162 and take advantage of the bonus offer. .wlh

HE FAVORS SERIALS

Dear Mr. Hamling:

My chief reason for writing you is to let the fans know that their dislike of serials is one of the silliest things I have ever heard of.

There is an extremely simple and foolproof way to avoid the suspense of waiting for future installments. You merely read the short stories and novelettes, and then set the magazine on the shelf until the next issue appears on the stands. Ditto in the case of a three-part serial. Now why didn't some fans think of that!

I cannot see why other magazines

don't adopt your custom of giving the word count of each story on the contents page. It is such a simple thing to do and gives the reader an idea of how much time it will take to read the story if his time is valuable.

Also, although it is probably done only to get into print, I disapprove of the type of letters where fans keep expressing their several favorite writers. Apparently the letter writers feel their approval rates them a valuable space in the reader column.

Madge lacks only one thing which tremendously enhances **OTHER WORLDS**, in my opinion—a Personals column. I have found it an invaluable aid in collecting and it acquires pen pals with similar interests. How about one in Madge?

Jerry Hunter
4612 East New York St.
Indianapolis 1, Ind.

The serial question keeps popping up, but so far the majority of readers seem to be against them. As to the Personals column, what about it, gang? .wlh

A FINE NOVEL

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This is my first attempt at writing to an editor. I was introduced to **IMAGINATION** through the efforts of the local s-f fan club. I can sincerely tell you I have not read a finer magazine. The March issue was sensational. **DARK DESTINY** was undoubtedly the finest stf novel in many years—anywhere. Dwight V. Swain is certainly capable of writing an excellent story.

REBIRTH was also splendid. I hope to see more of both Swain and Galouye in future issues of Madge.

Please do not have serials!

In closing, I consider **IMAGINATION** and **ASTOUNDING** the best

science & fantasy magazines on the market. (If any reader would care to write me I'd be happy to hear from him—or her!)

Robert McCann
173 Cebra Ave.

Stapleton 4,
Staten Island, N.Y.

You'll see a lot more of Swain and Galouye in future issues, Bob. How did you like their stories this month? And let's hear from you again...wlh

FAN REBUTTAL!

Dear Ed:

I just happened to be going over one of my copies of Madge and noticed in the letter section that a reader says fandom is run by an elite few who have fortunes to spend on collections, and that this clique runs the fan world in a snobbish, "You may come in if you like but you're not welcome," manner.

I'd like to state that this is not true. I offer my own case as an example.

I've been reading science fiction magazines for some years now but never took it very seriously until a while ago, perhaps six months. I started by subscribing to a number of fan magazines (FANDORA'S BOX regularly reviews them) to get the feel of the active fan field. Through the fanzines I started writing to other fans, and even wrote a few bits for some of the fan editors. Recently I started a fanzine of my own.

Now, am I one of the select few the writer spoke of? Do I have a fortune to spend on collecting? I daresay not. I'll enter college this fall and I'm strictly on an allowance.

I probably won't be able to make the Chicon over Labor Day simply because of the financial end. I've never met any of the fans I correspond with either. The point is, being an active stf fan has cost me little but has given me a whale of a lot of fun. So I say to the critics, don't condemn fandom—without knowing the facts yourself.

Richard Lupoff

186-19 Aberdeen Rd.
Jamaica, N. Y.

Say, you Eastern fans. how about picking Dick up on your drive to Chicago for the Chicon! Come on, gang, let's see that real fan spirit that Dick's talking about! . Well, that's all for this issue. Remember, get your letters in as soon as possible, and don't forget your vote for the best letter. And don't forget that the big news next issue is ARMAGEDDON, 1970! It's a Geoff St. Reynard novel you won't forget! Don't miss it . . . wlh
P.S. And now for the big news on the winning letter in the May issue. The voting was very heavy and close. Naturally there has to be a winner, however, and it was Alan Fogal, 810 Algonquin Ave., North Bay, Ont., Canada. Congratulations Alan, and you have your choice of any interior story illustration that appeared in the May issue of IMAGINATION. The interesting thing of note is that a letter of polite criticism against American fan letters received the most votes as best letter in the issue by American fans! We'd say that is evidence of 100% true blue fan spirit. So ok, get your votes in on the best letter for this issue, gang. Now, before you forget . . . wlh

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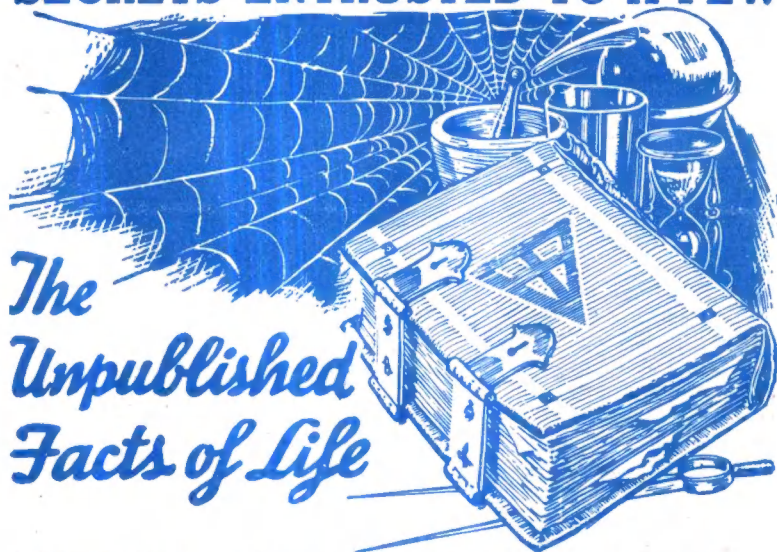
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JUPITER: Our largest planet, eleven times size of Earth. Large telescopes reveal numerous "belts" varying in width and color. Science speculates these are areas of frozen gases in atmosphere, including deadly ammonia and methane.

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by
cape1736

